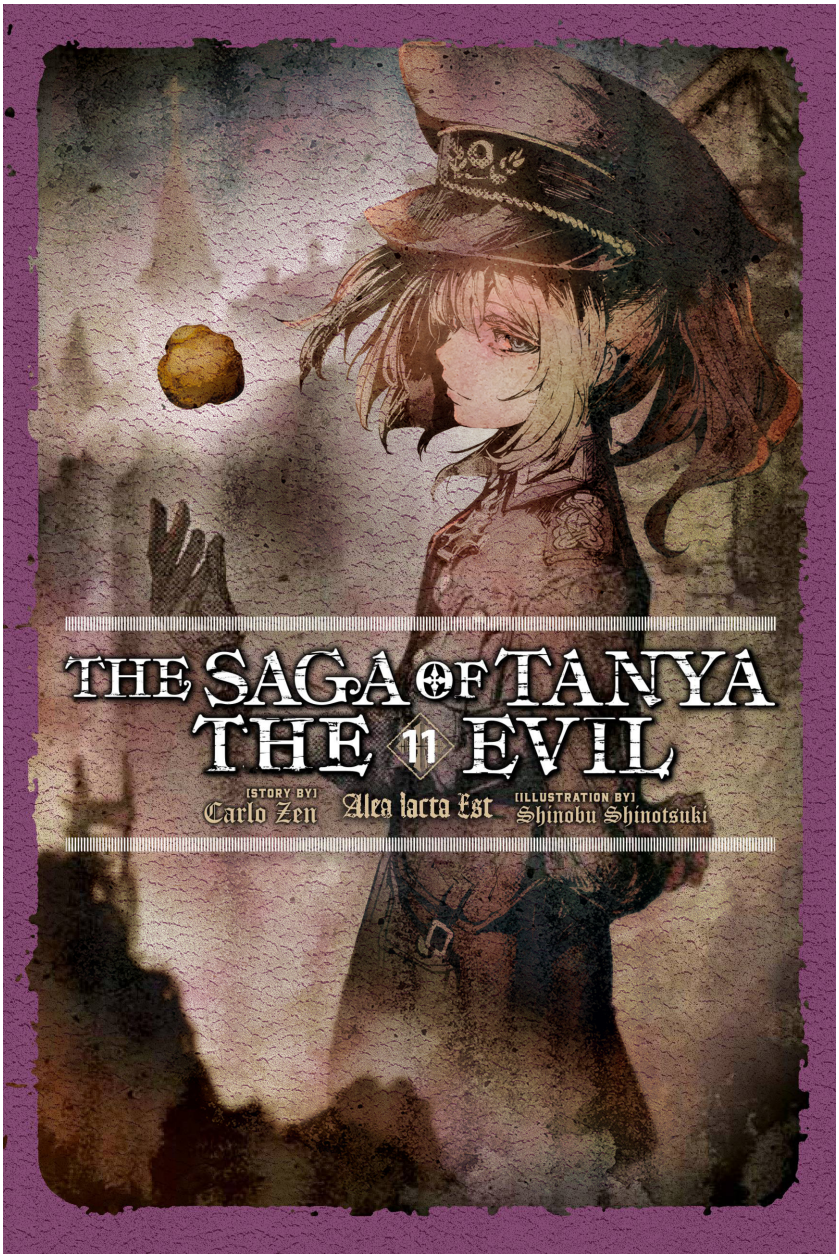
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11
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Carlo Zen
Alea Iacta Est
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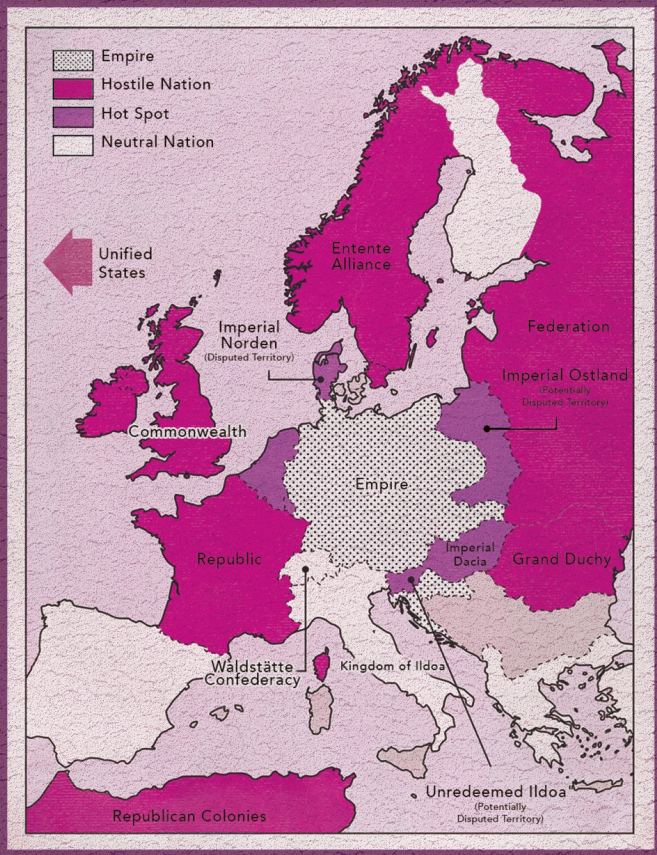
Shinobu Shinotsuki



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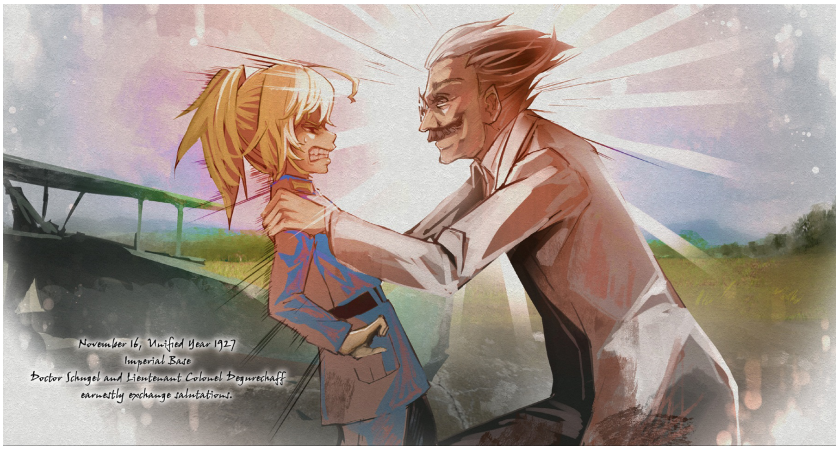
THE SAGA OF TANYA THE EVIL


November 16, Unified Year 1927
Imperial Base
Doctor Schugel and Lieutenant Colonel Degureschaff
earnestly exchange salutations.

THE SAGA OF TANYA THE EVIL

Alea Iacta Est

(11)

Carlo Zen

Illustration by Shinobu Shinotsuki

YEN ON
New York

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The Saga of Tanya the Evil, Vol. 11
Carlo Zen

Translation by Richard Tobin
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Relationship Chart

Federation

General Secretary (very respectful person)

Loria (very respectful person)

[Multinational Unit]

- Colonel Mikel **(Federation, commander)** — First Lieutenant Tanechka **(political officer)**
- Lieutenant Colonel Drake **(Commonwealth, second-in-command)** — First Lieutenant Sue

Kingdom of Ildoa

General Gassman **(army administration)** — Colonel Calandro **(intelligence)**

The Free Republic

Commander de Lugo **(head of the Free Republic)**

Empire

[General Staff]

- General Zettour **(Service Corps, inspector of the eastern front)** — Lieutenant Colonel Uger **(Service Corps, Railroad)**
- General Rudersdorf **(Operations)** — Colonel Lergen

Salamander Kampfgruppe (aka Lergen Kampfgruppe)

203rd Aerial Mage Battalion

Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff

- Major Weiss
  - First Lieutenant Serebryakov
  - First Lieutenant Grantz
  - (replacement) First Lieutenant Wüstemann

Captain Ahrens **(Armored)**

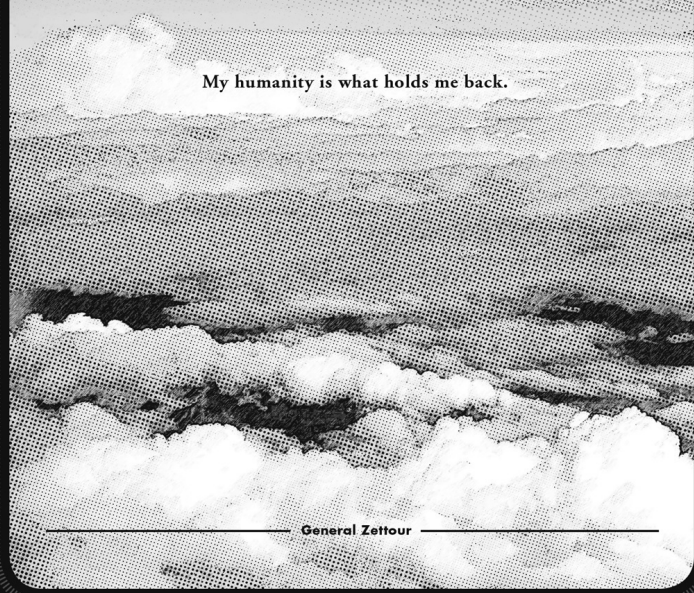
Captain Meybert **(Artillery)**

First Lieutenant Tospan **(Infantry)**

[chapter]

I

Create a Rift



My humanity is what holds me back.

General Zettour

[chapter] I Create a Rift

SEPTEMBER 25, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, GENERAL ZETTOUR'S OFFICE AT THE EASTERN FRONT ARMY HEADQUARTERS

"I read through the preliminary version of Plan B. And I have to ask… Are you insane? It reads like spur-of-the-moment gambling notes you scribbled on the back of a napkin."

Despite the attempt to keep a level of composure, there was hesitance in Zettour's words. If his conversation partner was his regular self, he may have picked up on this.

Rudersdorf, however, met his words with a look of pure bewilderment.

Damn it all, Zettour cursed in the confines of his mind.

"Let me be clear about this. What are you trying to do here? Why would you even consider something like this?"

"To avoid losing this war. I shouldn't have to spell it out for you."

The topic of their discussion was the plan upon which the fate of the empire rested—a topic worthy of a bit more enthusiasm.

What had happened to his friend who made the same pledge of military service, with whom he shared a vision for their nation's future? Why did he have to verbally spar with the man he considered his blood brother?

Zettour swallowed his initial doubts and continued to mechanically repudiate his friend as any general in his position should.

"I'm shocked. Do you intend to set Plan B in motion the moment diplomatic overtures fail? This says we're supposed to

overthrow the government, then immediately invade Ildoa?"

The imbecile sitting across from him gave a deep nod before continuing with a question from the bottom of his heart.

"What do you expect to come from this?"

Zettour was a career soldier who had watched the war develop from the inner depths of the General Staff Office. He knew the life blood of his nation was running thin.

He had faith his understanding was accurate.

This was why he, together with his long-time friend, struggled to find a way out of this mess with the least sacrifice.

Zettour gave his friend a stern gaze.

My friend, Rudersdorf, you damned fool… Just what kind of game are you up to?

"I wish to prevent the impending collapse of our nation. Ildoa has always been a weak point in our defense, and it's about time we fix that." Rudersdorf raised his head a bit as he spoke.

What an answer. It almost made Zettour want to have hope.

"And you believe there's something we can do to avoid our impending demise?"

"I think it should be avoided."

Not could, but should. It wasn't a question of possibility but an object of Rudersdorf's desire.

Is that the best he can come up with? Zettour sighed as he thought this to himself.

Was Plan B not the product of the Empire's exhaustion reaching a point where they could no longer entertain any other alternatives?

And yet here I am discussing this with my old friend. This idiot.

"I didn't expect you to be concerned with what we should do at this stage in the game, Rudersdorf. Perhaps your foresight is becoming harder to distinguish from your hope for the future."

"Zettour. Tens of thousands of soldiers have died under our command. We must…accept that we've made mistakes. But we also can't let these deaths be in vain. We must consider every possibility. We can't be the ones to destroy the very ideal our troops died fighting for…"

Many who served under Zettour had given up their lives, believing in the final victory. Not a day went by that those lost souls didn't haunt him.

Still, there was nothing he could do to change this.

The old man would have to live with this anguish for the rest of his life. Part of his duty as the deputy director of the general staff was to keep himself current on the state of his nation. That was how he knew it was impossible for the Empire to reach the Goddess of Victory.

Ah yes, that damned goddess. She'd finally lured the Heimat to hell with the sweet ambrosia of hope.

"Listen, my dull friend. This goddess you lust for is but an illusion. Let's refrain from committing adultery… Or have you forgotten the passionate love you share with your wife?"

"I make a clear distinction between military affairs and my home life. I'll have you know I've been nothing but faithful to both my spouse and the war."

"You say this, and yet here I watch you pursue a love we both know will never bear fruit."

"It's my duty. It's what I must do."

Ah, of course.

There was an audible tone of disappointment—or perhaps despair—in the sigh Zettour emitted.

His friend had sworn to serve the Reich. He would likely do anything for his nation. He loved his homeland, but this was nothing more than him crying out and weeping at the thought of losing it all.

We need to make a choice now!

"I'm going to say this because I'm your friend, Rudersdorf."

"Oh? Let's hear what you have to say."

"…You can't claim bankruptcy on a loan taken out as a gamble. Have you given any thought to what we stand to lose by attacking Ildoa? Not to mention the resources; I need everything we have to be sent to the east."

Everything required for waging war was running out. The shortages in both soldiers and supplies were chronic at this point.

"Where are you going to find the soldiers we would need to destroy Ildoa, which, need I remind you, is the only conceivable channel for peace negotiations we have? Take into account the current state of the Empire before you speak."

The impending collapse of the Empire couldn't just be conveniently ignored. Zettour was almost embarrassed that he needed to address it directly.

The two needed to assess their almost-certain defeat earnestly;

victory was no longer on the table. Their defeat did not, however, have to mean the end. Though the country itself may fall, its mountains and rivers would remain.

Even if the current Reich fell, as long as the Heimat continued to exist, there remained hope for the future. The Heimat was a sacred entity. It was the object of the military's service and loyalty —and they needed to protect it. Surely, Rudersdorf wouldn't throw away the Heimat's future for a single battle…would he?

Perhaps if he were a criminal, then yes, maybe… But as he was a patriot, it should've been impossible for him even to consider.

"…Have you not figured it out yet, Rudersdorf? Why can't you understand?"

Zettour's old friend responded to his conflicted question with a grin.

"Be straight with me. It's just you and me here."

These were words he had shared with his friends many times before. Zettour smiled.

"…Things are different now. I need to act my rank. I understand how fickle it all is, but this is our reality."

"Ranks… Yes, of course. Shall I have my assistant contact yours so we can arrange a meeting? Or would it be better for us to be frank about it?"

Under normal circumstances, it would be unprecedented for a lieutenant general and a general to jest in such a manner. Zettour could only grin and shrug off the joke in an attempt to make his friend dispense with the formalities.

"Well, we both know I've been promoted. We're essentially the same rank at this point."

"I don't want to brag, but you're right. You sure are in the know…"

"I merely tried thinking like a bureaucrat for once. Our promotions are probably nothing more than…an adjustment. Or an attempt to balance out the staff."

Though Rudersdorf was quiet, his expression did all the talking. Zettour knew Rudersdorf agreed with his sentiment. It was evident that he was ashamed of what would be a de facto promotion.

Zettour himself had received a similar, politically fueled promotion-in-name to lieutenant general for simply fulfilling his duty in maintaining the eastern front.

And it was the man sitting before him who had made the

necessary arrangements.

Lieutenant General Zettour, the mastermind behind the success on the eastern front! How absolutely wicked. They may as well call me the ringleader of some clique.

The old man chuckled at himself. He never wished for this. Had Zettour known what the future had in store for him, he never would've aspired to climbing the ranks in the first place.

His youth tricked him into believing that if he could wrench open the doors of the General Staff Headquarters with his own strength, then he would find glory and triumph in the army as a pioneer who would pave the way for the Reich and the Empire.

As he grew older and more jaded, he stubbornly clung to his hope: *I just need to win.*

He sought victory when he was a brigadier general.

It was within his grasp as a major general.

And as a lieutenant general, he continuously yearned for it.

His past was so beautiful.

All he could do was sigh when he compared it to his present. There was no glory in becoming a higher-ranking general only to oversee his nation's inevitable demise.

It was a lesson in how cruel fate could be.

"As someone who will soon be receiving a meaningless star on my shoulder, it brings me great joy to see an old friend finally receive theirs."

Zettour wrapped his cutting joke in a nice package of civility before shipping his statement out to his old friend. He, of all people, had the right to make a complaint or two.

"Congratulations on becoming a general, Rudersdorf. I thought I would go down in history as the general who deserved their title the least, but it seems I'll leave that to you."

"It's the war's fault." The firm denial of any personal responsibility was perfectly on-brand for Zettour's old friend. Though parts of him had changed over the course of this trying war, that remained consistent. There was only one thing Zettour had to say in response.

"Yes, of course. It's no one's fault, really. But thanks to everything that's come to pass, it's finally springtime for us war specialists, however unpopular with the Imperial family or politicians we may be."

"Springtime?"

“The spring of black death. What do you say? How about you take a load off?”

It was undeniable. The two men stood atop a mountain of corpses. They’d spent everything the Empire had. What’s more, the Empire had nothing to show for any of it. Any sane officer could only furrow their brow. No, any *patriot* would find the whole debacle utterly shameful. All the more important to not forget that the tinder fueling the raging flames of this total war was their nation’s youth.

They continued to throw on more and more of this precious fuel to keep the flames of war alive. They needed to be aware of what they did as they peppered the continent with the bodies of their children. Why did they make those sacrifices? What was their goal in carrying on? These questions needed to be answered, even if it meant being accused of defeatism.

“Do you wish to keep up this dance of death, rattling our bones like the skeletons we are? Or do you think it’s about time we made our preparations to head back to the graveyard?”

Zettour stared into his old friend’s eyes from across the plain desk at the command center…and found himself praying that his friend would close his impossibly opened arms.

“You’re a general of the Imperial Army now. So what if they call us egotistical? We make the decisions now, do we not?”

It was impossible for Zettour even to pretend he was a good person at this point.

That said, being evil wouldn’t stop him from doing what was right for his country. He could fight for the fatherland’s future, for the stability of the Heimat. It was, after all, his duty to think of how to bring an end to this war. How he would end it. How it would end.

He needed to think about how to make his nation’s final moments as painless as possible. Being the political soldier he was, Zettour was already considering this route. He watched as the man who sat across from him silently blew out a puff of cigar smoke.

The expression he saw was one of fatigue as Rudersdorf patiently waited for his old friend’s retort.

“Zettour…I know we’re in a tough situation right now. This is a dilemma for the fatherland.” The idiot continued with his cigar wedged between his lips and a look of firm resolution.

“But the Reich’s Generals can’t be the ones who make idle

complaints. You and I are nothing more than cogs in this machine dedicated to victory."

"Ah, yes. You and I are the two cogs that proudly display our stars earned with the deaths of our nation's youth."

"I won't pretend their blood isn't on our hands. But that's the exact reason we can't afford to lose. Our defeat may be inevitable, but there's no reason we should accept it lying down. We are soldiers of the Empire. We need to overturn the inevitable once or twice before considering throwing in the towel."

Damn it all. He's right.

The old man showed a wry grin before shaking his head to forget his despair.

"…Do you mistake our nation for the empire of the dead, Rudersdorf?"

It was fine and good to fight for the Empire's future. Sadly, their reality wasn't kind enough to let them play around with theories. Furthermore, the two of them had the misfortune of being the country's two highest-ranking generals. They were nothing but two incompetent fools running the disastrous show from their desks. With the state of the war, it was imperative they frankly discuss the coming fall of their nation, but they refused to accept defeat.

This was their final stand against reality. The senior staff officers would bend fact and logic if it was convenient. But it was impossible to create something out of nothing.

Doing so would be a miracle beyond even the senior staff's wizardry. To create a miracle that could not be, the race of people known as the general staff officers needed to rouse themselves.

And yet…

"Despite everything, you're still pursuing victory. That's why you want to nip Ildoa in the bud while you still can."

His friend gave a quick nod as if to say *precisely*, prompting Zettour to give his honest opinion.

"Rudersdorf, Ildoa will remain neutral until we're on the very brink of defeat. They may be a bunch of cunning opportunists…but their raison d'état is much more sensible than ours in that regard. Plan B should focus on taking care of the imbeciles in our own country."

"So you think we should leave Ildoa unattended? You see them too much as a business partner. See them for the thorn in the

Empire's side that they are. You mustn't ignore the geopolitical implications."

"You do have a point there…"

He gave a slight nod, but not without adding his own mental addendum.

The collapse he fears so much is inevitable at this point.

That was only cause for even more worry. If this idiot Rudersdorf were to remain fixated on victory, it would only increase the risk involved in carrying out Plan B.

He wished to unify the country's leadership and secure their southern border. While this may have theoretically been the best course of action, it was beyond what they could realistically accomplish.

"This is all a bit pie-in-the-sky, is it not?"

"…It's our duty as senior staff officers to bake a pie we can eat."

Though General Zettour gave another nod of agreement, he simultaneously began to feel this indescribable feeling welling up within him.

There were already vague signs that there may be a leak within a small part of the army.

Whether the source of that leak was a spy or simply an error in their ciphers…if Zettour's instincts were on their mark, then the Empire would have to fight with significant restraints.

Were the General Staff to impose a policy of victory-over-all, then more traditional methods may not be so effective in finding a path of survival.

God. Oh, God.

You're a rat bastard, you are.

Return my prayers.

Return my hope.

You've given us a destiny completely lacking in mercy.

You're toying with us.

Are you going to destroy our nation with some sort of divine intervention?

…So be it.

If that's how this must end.

He smiled.

We'll accept our fate.

He'd already dedicated his life to the Heimat. Why not become

the bastard it needed him to be?

Forgive me, my friend.

"Now, we're getting off topic. You came here to discuss Plan B. You even brought my most valued apprentice… Let's get down to brass tacks."

Zettour shot a glance at Rudersdorf. He seemed relieved. He wasn't a bad person…

"I'd like to include her in the discussion. Do you mind?"

"Not at all."

"Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff, show yourself in!"

General Rudersdorf's booming voice makes its way all the way to the waiting room. His voice carries like none other, but the issue here isn't how it carries, but what it carries. Whenever he calls for me, it usually means trouble.

I suppose there's no point in trying to escape from reality…

The brief flash of annoyance on my face goes away on pure reflex.

People are social animals. We're used to wearing many different masks. I don a serious expression before trotting my way to Rudersdorf's office like the good little soldier I am.

One must answer a superior officer's beckoning with great haste, after all. There's nothing to be gained from making a superior wait, and it could even cost you. With a quick but controlled knock on his door, I receive the impatient invitation to the meeting I was expecting. All right, take a deep breath. Once the door is open, I'll give a brisk greeting at the appropriate volume.

"Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff, reporting for duty!"

Now, as I give the salute that has engrained itself into my muscle memory, I will perform a brief reconnaissance of the room.

Yes…it appears things can only get much, much worse. The tension in the room is palpable. It's more than that. I expected it to be bad when I opened the door…but this is beyond anything I could've ever imagined.

I can't shake the instinctual feeling of how terrible things are. My nerves won't calm down. It's almost as if I'm about to be ambushed by the enemy.

I want to do nothing more than turn around and hightail it out

of the General Staff Office. But that's not an option for Tanya…so with even more energy than before, I address my superiors.

"May I inquire the purpose I've been called here today?"

As I ask this question, the first thing I must confirm is the expressions of my two superiors. Unfortunately, this is no small feat, as these two men are monsters… They both seem their usual selves at a glance. The ashtrays on Rudersdorf's desk, however, tell a different story.

General Rudersdorf is smoking cigars, like he always does. The state of affairs of General Zettour's ashtray, however, is not so ideal. Judging a superior's mood by how much they've been smoking may seem a bit simpleminded…but the amount of cheap military cigarette butts currently stuffed into his ashtray makes his frustration obvious. He isn't even smoking cigars.

I feel a shiver run down my spine, which only makes me straighten my posture more.

Though General Zettour is smiling, it would be prudent to assume he's practically brimming with rage right now. Well, maybe rage is a strong word. After all, he hasn't knocked the ashtray off the table yet, and there's still a uniformness to the way he's cramming them in there. It may be more of a *composed* anger.

Either way, he is not happy. And that's putting it lightly. And if General Rudersdorf is knowingly ignoring this fact despite their long relationship…well, that's also somewhat alarming.

The most foolish thing a subordinate can do when their superior is displeased is ask why. Standing stiffly and formally at attention, I keep my mouth shut until General Zettour calmly addresses me first.

"How is your battalion, Colonel?"

"We'll be combat-ready soon, sir. Though…according to Captain Ahrens's report, our unit strength has been cut in half due to the delivery of new tanks."

Unexpectedly, General Rudersdorf is the one who responds to my answer. He takes the cigar out of his mouth and asks with a bewildered look about him:

"Cut in half?"

"We've come into possession of a great many tanks riddled with defects. Without confidence in our mobility, the Salamanders cannot conduct our usual maneuver warfare."

"…Are they really in such poor condition?"

I can hear the confusion in his voice, unable to picture what I mean. The disconnect with reality is evident in his question. I suppose General Rudersdorf, in his noble position as the Deputy Director of the General Staff Office, doesn't understand the true state of the eastern front.

New models always come with problematic new systems. Not only that, but it's far too early for the tanks on the eastern front to undergo a dinosaur-like evolution.

"Come now, Rudersdorf. Perhaps you've been away from the war front for too long now?"

"What?"

This blossoming conversation between two generals ends on that note. For General Zettour remains silent with nothing but a grin on his face, leaving the unavoidable task of explaining his comment to Tanya. If fate is inescapable, then it must be embraced. I'll have to choose my words carefully and try to sound like a specialist.

"The new vehicles sport thicker armor and a higher-caliber armament, undoubtedly making for a more powerful vehicle. But… the more features that get rolled into the tanks, the less reliable they become. They are also several tons heavier now, which can't be avoided when making them bigger. We can only do so much to decrease their weight."

Furthermore, there is no guarantee these colossal heaps of metal we call tanks will be able to traverse the wilderness between the Federation and us. Of course, there's no need to articulate this given my current company. General Rudersdorf huffs in cigar smoke with a groan before showing a dim expression.

"I must admit, my experience made me a bit biased. Colonel… considering your ample experience in the east, what do you think can be done about the new tanks?"

"I believe our chances would improve if it were autumn. Though the snowfall could pose a problem…we would at least be able to achieve some mobility compared to the muddy ground we're currently dealing with." That said, Captain Ahrens has already aptly lamented about the truth in his report. Tanya's job is to make sure his warning is fully understood. "Fundamentally speaking, the problem lies within the weight and maneuverability of the tanks. The improved firepower comes at the cost of their mobility. The time of year has never affected our tanks this much before."

“So they sink in the mud. I’ll remember that.”

The old strategist gives a somber nod, and my boss is wearing a large grin. This is an interaction I’ve seen time and time again, and it always leads to more problems for Tanya.

“Now that lesson time for the Deputy Director of the General Staff is over, Colonel… Let’s bring this meeting back on track.”

And here I was hoping we could keep this discussion off said tracks… I quickly stifle these feelings of anguish. With as stern a stare as I can muster, I look General Zettour square in the eyes. Ah, crap.

“I would like to ask you about your capability to fight.”

“Yes, sir! Ask me anything.”

It’s quite frightening, really. Listen to how friendly General Zettour’s tone of voice is. His eyes are smiling, his cheeks are bunched up by that affable grin, and his shoulders are relaxed. Not to mention how composed he seems! This is terrifying. Like seeing a tiger that’s cornered its prey.

“Are the new tanks the only issue?”

Speak your mind, he casually prods me with his smooth tone. His facade of a benevolent superior willing to listen to their subordinate almost brings my guard down, but I can’t allow myself to be fooled just yet. All it takes is one look in his eyes. He may be smiling at me, but I can tell from his eyes that he’s stone-faced on the inside.

His cool, calm, and collected demeanor is nothing more than a camouflage he hides behind as he *observes* me. Under his stare, not unlike the gaze of a scientist observing a lab rat, I can’t help but wonder whether I’ll be able to answer him with a smile. This will probably be exceedingly challenging. Even Tanya, who has worked with the general for quite some time now, can’t expect to avoid an instant of hesitation before responding. But that single moment is already too long, and there’s no choice but to act like the trained pet she has become.

“Perhaps I should address the lack of artillery shells in our stock. Or the lack of horses used to deliver said artillery shells? I should probably also take this opportunity to protest the use of my aerial mages for detached missions.”

“Anything else?”

“I have grievances with how slow the air fleet is being deployed. The aerial support we’ve been promised on several

occasions always seems to be out of commission, forcing my Kampfgruppe to defend themselves. How do you feel about the fact that I could've had a new Kampfgruppe ready for deployment with just the reinforcements promised to me alone?"

"That's enough. So it's business as usual."

I swallow a groan and offer a small nod at the nonchalant summation when a surprised listener cuts in.

"Wait, are these not all significant problems?"

It's rare to see General Rudersdorf with such a look of confusion about him. More importantly, the fact that an assessment of front-line conditions is what triggered this reaction is more than enough to send chills down Tanya's spine.

"On the eastern front, this is what we call *ideal*."

"Even with all those problems?"

"Yes."

General Zettour is as pleasant as can be in the face of a speechless deputy director as he continues.

"Reliable commanding officers and reliable veterans. That's what makes the Salamander Kampfgruppe so desirable. It's difficult to resist the desire to use them in other operations. They're in a class of their own, which is why they have the special privilege of not being broken up to scrounge more leaders for other units."

You understand, right? my superior asks with a look, and I can only silently nod back.

The 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion is powerful, and there are no plans to break them apart. This is in spite of the fact that they hold a relatively large amount of the Empire's veteran mages. It truly is special treatment in its own right.

Then again…this poses its own problems for Tanya.

"Rudersdorf, this is the true state of the *stability* on the eastern front you take for granted. Understand that we are barely managing to scrape by as is."

"You'll figure something out. You always do."

"I can give you my honest word that tricks will not keep us in the game for much longer. We are merely hanging on by the skin of our necks here."

This exchange between my superiors tells the story of the extreme discrepancy in understanding what's happening on the Empire's war front. It would've been an honor to be here spectating this if I were a historian. However, it's worth noting that it would

only be enjoyed in the afterlife even then.

When things don't go as intended, a superior may shift some of their burdens onto their subordinates. This is a disaster for the worker when even a single superior does so, but Tanya is currently watching both of her bosses scowl as they chain-smoke! Needless to say, there is nowhere for me to escape. All I can do is stand at attention while I bask in the secondhand smoke and wait for my superiors to speak next.

Oh, how wonderful it would be if they'd let me leave right now. Unfortunately, these two fog machines have a habit of crushing Tanya's hopes and dreams. With a pensive furrowed brow, General Rudersdorf is the first to finally break the silence.

"Why don't we lay out everything on the table and openly discuss Plan B."

"Fine idea, General Rudersdorf. We're two friends. Let's be frank with each other."

This is it. I need to interject right now. It may be my only chance, but maybe if I'm lucky, there is the tiniest inkling of hope for me yet.

I need to be both modest and sincere with my tone. If this works, they may just let Tanya out of here.

"Is it all right for me to be here?"

No, this is above your rank, Lieutenant Colonel. Is it too much to ask for a little compassion in the form of a dismissive phrase?

Aaand he's smiling. The ringleader of the General Staff is smiling in a way that almost proves this world's God has abandoned it.

You needn't worry about that. General Zettour's grin silently affirms my greatest fear. Then I feel General Rudersdorf offer me a firm pat on the back. He's grinning from ear to ear as he mercilessly informs me of my fate.

"It's the opposite, Colonel. You're the General Staff Office's shining star. Your battalion will be at the center of the operation."

What a funny idea. So amusing, in fact, that the self-preservationist in me almost wants to scream.

The center of Plan B? …Damn it all to hell.

"…Perhaps I should express that it would be my honor to be in such a position."

There is so much I want to say as the person being corralled into this mess. But considering my rank, I am limited to vague terms to express my discontent.

I shouldn't have to mention that I'm currently racking my brain for an excuse to leave.

Anything would work; there must be something. I'm prepared to use any excuse in the book so long as it will allow me to avoid signing my death sentence here and now. This is the plank of Carneades. Hell, I'll pledge my allegiance to the Communists if it comes to that, at least on the surface.

But alas, there is nothing. I suppose this is just how the world works.

"Colonel, you seem quiet. Are you not excited? I plan on assigning you the most honorable of duties."

General Rudersdorf glares right at me. I find myself so perplexed by his question that I can't even decide how I should answer. From a self-preservationist standpoint, the answer is a hard no. Ugh, I have a bad feeling about all this. But being the political animal Tanya is, it is nigh impossible for her to escape this. I know full well that to even attempt it would be suicidal both socially and administratively.

This is a real conundrum. I feel an irresistible urge to curse the universe. I know that the embodiment of evil, Being X, must be behind all of this.

And as always, it falls on the shoulders of us humans to fix the shitstorms the so-called gods concoct. It would be Tanya's most trusted and reliable superior, General Zettour, who would take up the burden this time.

"Come now, Rudersdorf. What, are we forcing our subordinates to give the answers we desire now? Don't tell me you've sunken so low as to try and fish for compliments from the troops."

Heavy support artillery comes crashing down from my flank. As much as I appreciate the support, it seems General Rudersdorf isn't going to budge on this one.

"Pipe down, Zettour. This is a question the girl needs to answer."

Except I really don't want to. I don't want to be involved in this at all. My only wish is that you wouldn't try to bring me into this in the first place!

"I understand how difficult this must be for someone who has sworn loyalty to their nation, and while you may need some time to sort out your feelings, there'll be problems if you can't reply."

What an absolutely terrifying statement. This man is on a

mission to make me answer his heartless question!

His eyes are homed in on me. I can see the unwavering determination. Shit, shit. Those are the eyes of a man who knows he's in the right. He's exactly like that Being X, whom I so very loathe!

"It's fine. A level of indecision can be tolerated. But know this is what must be done."

Rudersdorf says he can accept this, but his eyes tell me he needs me to comply… I hold myself back from letting him know just how screwed I'll be if I follow his orders.

Agh, how stressful it is to be unable to say what you truly wish to!

"General, is this question of necessity?"

We are but slaves to necessity, or perhaps devout members of its religion. In the social group known as the Imperial Army, the senior staff officer is, without exception, a class of person who sees being restricted to logic and duty as a good thing.

I give an ever-so-slight glance to General Zettour in an attempt to seek his aid, but General Rudersdorf attacks first with his own passionate spiel.

"Necessity is the determining factor that compels my assignments. I'm willing to hear your opinion on the matter, but it should be self-evident that at this stage in the game, carrying out your duty without fuss is all the Reich needs from you!"

His remark clarifies that he isn't likely going to accept a rebuttal. At this rate, silence is my only option. Of course, that isn't a real choice to begin with. Should I challenge him on this? Or should I perhaps make a beeline to the military police? But what if the MPs are already under the influence of the General Staff?

The vortex of conflicting interest Tanya has found herself at the center of is harrowing. But then a glimmer of hope appears.

"Truthfully, this is more of a question of what *may* be necessary."

"What are you getting at?"

Caught off guard by the remark, General Rudersdorf looks to his side to find General Zettour as stone-faced as can be. With a wave of his hand, he calms General Rudersdorf down. I couldn't ask for a more reliable ally!

"Tell me, Colonel Degurechaff. Could you order your battalion to ruthlessly take control over the imperial capital should the need

arise? Even if it meant, for instance, having to eliminate any friendlies who resist?"

Correction!

I was wrong!

And with that, my only bead of hope shot straight through my heart and down to hell.

To be honest, I'm having a tough time figuring out whether or not he intended to help me with this question. You see, I'm fairly certain we could do it. In fact, I think it's basically guaranteed. General Zettour probably doesn't know this…but I'm quite proud of how much I've come to know my subordinates in our long time spent together. My soldiers follow their orders, *no matter what*. I should add that they are also bloodthirsty war hounds who aren't picky when it comes to an opponent. An attribute I feel is virtuous in times of war.

I tell them who we need dead and they loyally follow my every order! I wouldn't put it past them to start plugging in the coordinates to the Imperial palace while I give the briefing! What incredible discipline! What unparalleled obedience! But who in their right mind would ever create such monstrosities?! Oh, right, *me*! Damn it!

"They're your soldiers. Give us your honest opinion."

General Zettour kindly puts the ball in my court, but what should I do with it? Should I tell him the honest truth like a simpleton? I can't allow myself to do this. The thinnest of lifelines has presented itself. This might be the only way for me to escape this discussion that is well beyond my rank and pay grade. There's no way I'll let this chance pass me by.

"Please excuse me…could I take some time to think about my answer?"

I look up at the two and find they have contrasting expressions: General Rudersdorf is clearly displeased and General Zettour is extremely satisfied.

It's safe to assume the former wants me ready to kill. But what about the latter…? Is it safe for me to believe in his supposed reluctance? Or is this some sort of loyalty test?

"Colonel, I wouldn't put it past this imbecile to try and pressure you into giving a hasty answer…but feel free to ignore him."

"He may be saying that in jest, but he's right. I want to hear your honest opinion as a strategist and commanding officer without

delay."

Behind the veil of sincere silence, Tanya is cursing up a storm. On the inside, she might as well be foaming at the mouth with irritation. Can somebody point me in the direction of the nearest dump? There is a boatload of complaints I wish to dispose of!

"I would appreciate it if you didn't bully me so much."

Talk about power harassment. Seeing as I want to change my job anyway, I would run for the Labor Standards Inspection Office if I could. Sadly, the Reich's bar for labor laws is nonexistent, especially regarding its military.

Oh, labor standards. Labor standards! How I long for you so! We yearn for you on the front lines of this alternate world!

The libertarian in me is utterly humiliated by these feelings, but nonetheless, I must face the brutal reality I find myself in. I take a deep breath and reorient myself. This is a monumental decision that must be made. My troops may be the enforcers of a coup d'état. While being kept entirely in the dark about their plan is an issue in its own right…being placed at the center of it is far worse.

"I agree that it is our obligation to fulfill our duty. But I worry about the mental state of my soldiers. We need to consider their viewpoints and internalized moral standards on an individual basis."

As I express these sufficiently legitimate concerns, I think with all my might.

Were I in Modu Chanyu's position, I would take pride in personally shooting my father down with my own bow and arrow. But this isn't Mongolia, nor is it the second century. The saddening fact of the matter is that despite the raging war, these are modern times. It's safe to say that cultural and legal standards hold far more value than they did in the Mongolian plains. The last thing I want to do is set myself on a collision course with these values.

Conducting a violent revolt would end with *me* being painted as the villain. This would send any prospects for a job change to the bottom of the sea. I can do only one thing to avoid this all too predictable future. I must fool them.

"I'm sorry to say that it may be difficult."

I'm not declaring it can't be done, but they also can't interpret my statement in a way that suggests it can be. This predicament is made even more apparent by the troubled tone of my voice. I'm sure I sound utterly distraught, even from the perspective of

onlookers.

And yet, General Rudersdorf responds with an unexpected look. He crosses his arms and searches for the right thing to say…before showing his understanding.

"That's fair. We'll figure something out down the line."

He's delaying the decision. Or, more aptly, he's simply being indecisive. Either way, it seems I've managed to maneuver my boat through the skerries threatening to beach me. For now. More time is what I need to prepare for my next evasive maneuver, and any amount helps. What I could use right now is an excuse, be it a long-term assignment or deployment to the front lines—anything will do—to distance myself from General Rudersdorf.

Anything can happen during a war. Expect the unexpected, right?

Speaking of unexpected, General Rudersdorf looks like he's about to casually toss a bomb into Tanya's hands.

"Here's an idea. Would you like to be promoted?"

I stiffen up and blink blankly. A promotion? Everyone wants to be promoted, and I'm no exception. It's human nature to desire advancement. A completely and utterly natural thing to pursue. That is, if we're in normal circumstances.

"I don't quite like the sound of that."

I can only chuckle bitterly to myself at the obvious bait. Times of crisis can spur changes in core values. And what a dramatic change this is for Tanya. It's identical to how violent fluctuations in market value can affect the price of goods. A promotion in times of peace is something to strive for, but safety takes precedent over prestige in times of crisis. I mustn't mistake what holds true value.

"You almost had me there."

The HR department doesn't hint at dramatic personnel changes without a proper motive. And yet! I can't deny the temptation of moving up in the ranks! There is an undeniable allure to gaining a higher position, especially before attempting to change your job.

This offer, however, is a carrot that General Rudersdorf is dangling in front of his would-be pawns. There is no scenario where this carrot isn't laced with rat poison.

"So you are interested in pursuing a high rank?"

He's enjoying this. I keep up my serious expression while I genuinely lament having to deny his offer.

"I appreciate your generous evaluation from the bottom of my

heart. But I am an officer with responsibilities. I have an obligation to my soldiers as their officer, and I can't allow myself to leave them."

After all, if I bite your carrot, you're going to make me do something highly illegal. What General Rudersdorf sees is a patriotic, passionate officer who cares about her soldiers, a facade Tanya must keep up despite how jarring it feels to reject an open offer for career advancement.

"I know how much you love fighting alongside them on the front lines…but being pushed up through the ranks by the Personnel Division is another one of your obligations as an officer. Lieutenant Colonel, do you have any interest in commanding your own regiment?"

"What? You want me to head my own…regiment?"

"Even ignoring the fact that this is a time of war, you've accumulated far too many accolades. The more medals you accrue, the more difficult it has become to use you for various operations. There is an increasingly loud voice demanding we bring you back to a legitimate career path."

A legitimate career path. That sure sounds delightful. Even with my iron will to change jobs, there is a part of me that finds it somewhat difficult to resist such an attractive offer. I feel my throat drying up. Is this offer a part of his plan to keep me in the General Staff Office? The offer is far too attractive, but the Empire's ship will be underwater before long… Then again, a ship is still a ship until it sinks…

"You're suggesting I take a position similar to Colonel Lergen's, correct?"

"That man is far too mainstream, so it would be slightly different…but yes, along those lines."

In short, my criteria essentially match those of the gentlemen who have experience as field commanders in name only. It's an incredible offer. Being a member of the General Staff, it's technically possible for Tanya to follow the same career path as Colonel Lergen.

Though, it's hard to ignore the unique path I've had to go through. I haven't gone through the same primary school–military academy–first regiment–war college pipeline to get into the General Staff Office. Hell, I didn't even go to preschool in this life. Although I have experience as a soldier for a company when you include my

time as a mage officer, my career path is very different from that of any other officer you'll find in the army. This is why there has been a delay in my progression through the ranks. I also can't shake the feeling that there is a bit of discrimination afoot.

If there is such a factor in play, it must be due to my lack of a formal education. How humbling. There is logic in applying filters across the board for things like this. I'll happily recognize this as an ex-HR representative. Simultaneously, the danger of using a filter is the possibility of removing people with skill and experience. I find that filters are counterproductive in the hiring process when misused. All that being said…it seems a job change is the only way out for me.

In terms of contracts, advancing too high in the ranks and receiving training at a higher level can make it difficult to change jobs later on. An employee who uses their previous company's funds to get their master's in business at a top university only to transfer out once they've finished will undoubtedly have difficulty finding a new job. If this case is similar, then I should remain sincere.

After making a series of considerations in her head, Tanya ekes out her answer.

"I'll have to pass."

Had this offer come a few years earlier, I'd be chomping at the bit.

But it is too late for me, in both a systematic and age-related sense. Everything comes down to the fact that Being X had me born into this world a mere nine years before the war started. This is why I hate that self-proclaimed god.

"Darn it, she rejected me."

While General Rudersdorf lets out a defeated sigh, General Zettour has an almost-jubilant smile on his face.

"What's wrong? Can't handle a little rejection?"

He holds his soldier's tobacco in one hand and raises a brow in surprise. General Rudersdorf responds with a wry smile as he begins to hoist himself out of his chair. He then shoots a regretful glance at the clock on the wall before letting his shoulders fall.

"Well, I must begin preparations for my next meeting."

"With the officials from the Council for Self-Government? Here's some advice… Whatever you do, don't make any empty promises to them. At the same time, don't paint a picture of doom and gloom."

General Zettour says this with a knowing look, to which General Rudersdorf responds with a somber expression.

“Are you that concerned about it? You can come with me and oversee the meeting if you wish.”

“We’d be too perfect a target if we showed up together. A Federation agent wouldn’t be able to restrain themselves from throwing a bomb at us.”

“Have they infiltrated us to that extent?”

All three of us sigh in unison.

A feeling of anxiety fills the room before the master of the eastern front shares a warning with a grave expression.

“There’s no proof that they haven’t, and I believe it’s already happened… Unless you or Colonel Degurechaff have any evidence to the contrary?”

“…I do not. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“One more thing. Appearances are important, so I arranged for a new guard to escort you.” General Zettour sighs as he grumbles to himself. “You see, I don’t want to draw attention to the fact that we have children serving as military officers, for diplomatic reasons. We need to act like the powerful country we are, so I assigned you a new cadre of elite soldiers who look the part to protect you.”

“Ah, yes, assigning your men to take me to and from the meeting while you sit back and relax, I see.”

With an uncomfortably stern expression to the point of seeming exaggerated, the person in charge of the eastern front was as serious as could be.

“Don’t be like that. Watch your surroundings. The guards are there for your protection.”

“…I understand. I’ll accept your guards. They’re probably less annoying than the last group.”

My boss lets out a sigh, presumably at his counterpart’s stubbornness. With his fingers pressed to his temples, he laments to Tanya in a way that makes his exhaustion obvious.

“Can you believe this man? He never will change. I can only imagine your enthusiasm when you have to accompany him as a bodyguard.”

“One of my soldiers, First Lieutenant Grantz, comes to mind. I only wish he was here to hear you say that. I’m sure your kind words would have him choking back tears.”

I shoot the deputy director a glance and catch him feigning

ignorance.

"Ah yes, he was one of the soldiers you lent me as a guard. He's commanding the company, I believe. How is he?"

"I imagine that at this very moment, he's already fallen victim to the Empire's beer."

The two of us share a good laugh.

As I watch General Rudersdorf gather his things and hurry out of the room to meet the officials from the Council for Self-Government, I am overcome with relief at having successfully survived this meeting.

The talks will likely lack any real substance. They just want the impression of the army cooperating with the committee—something utterly unnecessary in these desperate times. This man is running the General Staff Office. Every second he has is a precious resource.

After we watch him quickly leave the office, General Zettour gives a wry laugh.

"He's always in a hurry, that Rudersdorf."

I feel the same way. I wanted to properly thank General Zettour for making the arrangements for a new convoy. It was what Tanya and her men were sent here to do.

"Thanks to your kindness, my subordinates and I will finally have some time to rest."

"Well, you make sure to get the rest you need. It will be a long trip back."

It was the perfect way to repay my troops and me. This man is a good boss. Though, I would soon find myself regretting not picking up on the early signs he is showing now. You see, when it comes to working every last human being you can find to the bone, General Zettour and General Rudersdorf are the same creature. No, putting them in the same league almost feels silly considering how much this man puts me through the wringer. My boss's simple act of kindness shouldn't have warranted an emotional reaction.

"Ah, I almost forgot. Colonel, there's something I need you to do."

"Anything for you, sir."

This is no time to be excited about some time off. But nothing could possibly be more enticing than the word *vacation* at that very moment. To think, while I'm still basking in the glory of having managed to finagle my way out of General Rudersdorf's troublesome proposition—

“Oh, it’s nothing too serious. I just may need you to assassinate a close friend of mine in the near future. You only need to bear this in mind for now.”

—now I have to navigate *this*.

“Understoo… Huh?”

I cut myself off mid-nod and look at my boss in shock. He just warned his friend to be wary of his surroundings, and now he’s humming the tune of his death. I was under the impression that I have impeccable hearing, but I may have to get my ears rechecked.

“Sir?”

Yes? He looks back at me with an expression of utmost sobriety.

This is the moment I realize what kind of a monster I’m working for.

Part of me still wants to doubt my hearing…but this is far too important to let slide. I need to make sure I’m not mistaken.

“Could you repeat that for me, sir? I think I may have misheard your orders.”

“I want you to paint the wall with the contents of my close friend’s cranium. Is that less confusing for you?”

He says this as smoothly as can be. There’s literally no way to misinterpret his words. He’s treating it like it’s nothing.

Does he want me to murder General Rudersdorf?

“I request to know your intentions.”

“Oh, are you interested in the reason?”

“I can’t murder somebody without reason. I’m a soldier. An officer who knows both honor and duty.”

Playing the part of a *serious commanding officer* has its benefits. It all depends on how you use it. I put a little space between myself and General Zettour. Should he close this gap and meet me halfway, it would allow me to be franker with him. And I won’t have to wait long for that to happen.

“You see…that man is a strategist through and through.”

There is a sadness to the chuckle General Zettour gives as he begins to share with Tanya how he truly feels.

“When plan A fails, he has a plan B ready. If that plan proves unsuccessful, then he’ll have a third plan on the back burner. He only has victory in his sights. That is how he operates.”

That’s the soldier in him; it’s his nature. Those who have been on the front lines long enough realize that this very nature is a double-edged sword for most who wield it.

"…Making swift and decisive choices with firm resolution is what strategists do. Their entire being is fixated on unconditionally forging a path to victory."

The empire has never experienced defeat before. Our nation thoroughly believes that fate is on its side due to it being an emerging superpower. This sentiment remains true for our war effort as well.

How can we win? That is the only question for a strategist. The majority of the Empire's population can't even ask the question *Do you think we'll win?* And for the few of us who can, this is precisely the reason for our unhappiness.

With a lonely look about him, General Zettour laughs to himself.

"Since the dawn of our nation, the Imperial Army always found a way to win in the end. Adverse circumstances are something we've overcome many times in our history. We bide our time with defensive actions, then attack when the time is right to claim victory."

I can hear both love and hate in his tone for the lost legend of which he speaks.

"Our inability to win this war is without historical precedence. To think it's something our generation must face…is all but outrageous."

"General Rudersdorf doesn't seem willing to accept this change in history."

"He most likely won't. For he is an excellent strategist. And sadly for him, he is a strategist who knows no defeat. Therefore, even if he can perceive his defeat, he would never actually process it."

General Zettour groans as he speaks, a sign of the hopelessness he feels when he thinks of his long-time friend.

"That idiot. He just may decide on his own to execute the Plan B we created for the worst-case scenario simply on the premise that there are no other options." He cradles his head in his hands as he continues. "Not only does he seek to carry out a military coup, but he wants to invade Ildoa immediately afterward? All in the name of victory? All that does is delay our nation's suicide. He wants to start a new war to continue the current war. War is a means to settle a conflict. It can't be the goal."

"Is this where you two disagree, sir?"

The answer to this is, of course, yes. He doesn't have to say anything; his demeanor says it all. An exhausted General Zettour nods before shaking his head in annoyance.

"I'm a weak man. I can only support a Plan B that plays into a clean defeat for our nation." His lips curl with a moment's hesitation before continuing. "General Rudersdorf is different. He's a loyal strategist to the great Empire. The only plan he will try to come up with is one that prevents our nation's defeat. If the times were different, I would likely hang for my defeatism."

"Have you considered shifting your thought process to seek out victory?"

My superior gives a lonely chuckle that makes it obvious he has.

"In terms of strategy, I've given it deep thought. Depending on the circumstances, it wouldn't be impossible to eke out a win of some sort in the end. But, operationally speaking… It simply can't be done… The results are clear as day."

With a scratchy voice, he chides:

"…I can't allow our ancestor's legacy to end with a misconceived mass suicide."

What he says is right, but his wording is far too indirect.

I need to make him say it in more explicit terms. Just in case I have to testify in a court of law at some point down the line.

"Sir, I am a soldier."

Essentially, I fear for the future if I act without clear orders and a very solid explanation for said orders. I stare straight into his eyes, and in the most earnest tone I can muster, I ask him what a soldier needs to ask.

"As a soldier, I need to understand your true intentions."

"Lieutenant Colonel, I am a good person, but an evil member of this organization. I'm obligated to prepare for our collapse."

Ah, there's that term again. *Obligated.* What a convenient concept. Although, it is as ruthless as it is convenient.

"If Colonel Lergen manages to plot a course for reconciliation, then it would solve all of our problems. But the buck stops with me to come up with the plan in case he fails."

The self-sacrificial nature of his sense of duty is incomprehensible. That said, his interest doesn't conflict with mine. If there were a financial receiver who could accurately assess the current situation, it'd help significantly mitigate the shock of the

declining Reich's eventual bankruptcy. As a stakeholder, I would be in the right to side with General Zettour. Nevertheless, even if I can explain my case to the jurors, I still won't have enough to convince them. I need a bit more.

“I understand if a patriot like yourself chooses to gun down the defeatist before you, Colonel. You’ve always been a realist who considers avoiding defeat a victory.”

What do you say?

General Zettour tempts me with a smile.

“So, are you going to shoot me? Personally, I think it would be more logical to shoot my friend.”

“And that’s why you want to remove him?”

“Yes. We need to do it so this war can end. For peace. I’ll take responsibility should the need arise. I just need your help.”

That’s basically the perfect answer. I give him a B+. This should meet the bare minimum of what I need. I answer him with a slight grin, which General Zettour follows with a gentle nod.

“Then I will leave it to you to take care of my dear old friend.”

“The deed will be done as soon as you give the order. But there is one more thing I must ask.”

I want to learn everything I can in this moment. I want to know what his plan is, who will be doing what, and what I need to do. If I can’t quit this game, I at least need to learn its rules.

“What is your plan?”

“Don’t play the fool, Colonel. Well, I can see why you would want me to declare my plans. I’d be happy to oblige so listen closely. If we’re going to resort to a contingency plan, the Reich needs to be ready to close up shop. I’m prepared to lay out everything on the table in order to make this possible.”

Where most people aim for a V-shaped recovery, General Zettour wants to calmly settle any outstanding debts. He even has a closing sale in mind. I’m suddenly quite captivated by his plan; I want to hear more. This is starting to get interesting. General Zettour stares attentively at me as he silently takes a puff of his cigarette before abruptly standing up. He then walks over to the window and, without saying a word, begins to stare off into the sky.

I’ve never seen his back look so small before.

I wonder if even the great General Zettour is tormented by helplessness. With his back turned to me, he continues to speak.

“There isn’t much we can do. I simply want to make our emergency landing as soft as possible.”

He seems so fragile. Or perhaps those words offer insight in

their own way. I can't tell what the general is feeling in this moment. He stares up at the ceiling and puffs out cigarette smoke with a sigh.

"What we need is more time. Then we should be able to stick our landing. In that sense, that numbskull Rudersdorf and I may be seeing the same dream. Only the endings are different."

People tend to want to carry on as normal, even if they struggle to scrape by. The natural desire to maintain the status quo can be quite frightening. But there's hope yet, as the rational individual known as Zettour appears resolute in his desire to reject this implicit bias.

"However, I am a senior staff officer. Whether I like it or not, my whole being is telling me…Plan B needs to put an end to this all."

With the way things are going, this means settling for defeat. It appears that with respectable intelligence, anyone can pick up on the fact that the Empire is a lost cause. Anyone with logical reasoning should be able to make this rational prediction. What is surprising for me is that there is only one gentleman in the Imperial Army willing to openly discuss our impending defeat.

Leaders with unique perspectives are in the position to greatly divert history from a potentially ruinous path. The problem is, when they come forward with their big plan, this is usually what you get:

"I've looked into the current plan and, unfortunately, it is the same strategist drivel filled with hopes and dreams of victory."

"You don't have an issue with a single source of command, do you?"

"Not at all. But it's his plan itself I can't agree with. Forcing the military into control of the nation before our final moments will only make our downfall more dramatic. We need to make the arrangements necessary to end the war."

It is a complex situation, and General Zettour has likely been run ragged coordinating the private sector, the government, and the military. I sigh deeply, as if the anguish drawing from my resignation to accept my fate has taken shape in my mind.

"Whatever the case may be, we will not be able to avoid disarray… If we make a mistake, it's only natural for the enemy to take advantage of it. To ensure these negotiations happen, we need to strive for peace."

General Zettour offers this painful conclusion as if he were a mathematician solving an equation.

"Given what we must do, my great and powerful friend Rudersdorf will become a nuisance. We need him out of the way. Killing him…is our only option."

My inner businessperson feels an undeniable revulsion to my superior's ruthless intent. The word *tolerance* has long since been removed from Tanya's dictionary. And when people are tired, sometimes their inner selves come out. An undeniable sense of rage is what drives my next remark.

"What a foolish notion."

"What?"

"You seek to kill him because he is a nuisance? How absurd."

It is utter nonsense. So we're just going to kill the man? That's entirely out of the question—an irrational argument not worth a moment's discussion.

"A necessary sacrifice. I'll take responsibility for what follows. Are you one to hold tools of death in contempt?"

He misunderstands me here. I wonder if all the stress is why General Zettour is suddenly willing to justify such an outlandish thought? Though not without concern for what's to come, I attempt to correct his way of thinking.

"You say you wish to simply kill the man. But you can't be serious."

"I meant every word."

"It is an absurd idea. If those are your orders, then I am obligated to shoot you here and now to defend my dignity."

Considering the circumstances, I can't afford to be on the wrong side. Even if General Zettour is willing to accept the fall of the Empire, I can't accompany him if he proceeds in a way that can't be realized.

"…Are you seriously against killing an ally this late in the game?"

The color drains from his face as he ekes out his question, which only adds to my utter disappointment. He's making a colossal misunderstanding.

"My apologies, but that isn't quite what I mean. I simple wish to suggest that your way of thinking is completely off the mark."

"What do you mean? What are you trying to say?"

"Again, I apologize for my insolence. But, sir, do you…really

need me to spell it out for you?"

I study my superior, who only shakes his head before me.

"…I'm not sure what you're getting at."

I'm almost astonished. I'm not against killing people. I'm simply denying the efficacy of assassination in these specific circumstances. Why is he so surprised by my reaction?

"It's a waste of a good human resource. Sir, we are not in a place where we can afford to lose our higher-ups so easily, never mind throwing them away."

"We're removing a cancer from our organization. It will not be painless…"

"That's just it, sir. Pain is a necessary part of the process. What I'm trying to articulate, though, is an issue with how you are approaching this."

This is tactics 101! Even the best laid goals can't be achieved if the strategic approach is completely misguided! I'm curious as to why today of all days I can't get through to him.

I'm not going to pretend that I'm the perfect communicator. I'm proud to say that I'm humble in this regard despite being a specialist. Naturally, I excel when it comes to things like being attentive or clear with my wording or picking up on unvoiced intentions…but I'm not perfect.

And I also understand that sometimes there are misunderstandings. But on the battlefield, a misunderstanding can kill you as sure as any bullet. Taking into account my experience on the battlefield, I know that I can communicate more efficiently than most.

On top of that, we both know how the General Staff conducts business. We share the same values. General Zettour and I speak the same language.

It's strange we would ever talk past each other in the first place. It's practically a miracle.

The stress must be to blame. I bet it's influencing our ability to process information. That just means I'll need to be direct with him, which is fine.

I reconstruct my logic before laying it out for him.

"Humans need to be killed efficiently, but their lives should not be wasted."

I believe this from the bottom of my heart. This is a hill that I'm willing to die on. The waste of good human capital is a cardinal sin.

It is nothing less than our duty to carefully develop and properly use that precious capital. And there isn't a single soul who appreciates waste.

"If we must kill a general, the Reich needs to ensure a return on all the investment that went into that man. We aren't, or at least, I'm definitely not someone who advocates for murdering staff on a whim."

"Then what do you advocate for?"

"I advocate for peace."

I declare this sincerely and solemnly. As an individual forced to participate in a war dominated by chaos, the only thing I seek is order and peace. Naturally, I also believe that General Zettour loves peace with all his being.

All civilized people long for peace, lest they be criminally insane warmongers who would use their own nation as fuel to wage an all-out war.

I continue to speak from a perspective of beautiful peace and productivity.

"Without a shred of doubt, I love peace and only peace. Though, as a soldier dedicated to my nation's interests, I merely wish to carry out my duties as efficiently as possible."

I refrain from adding *and earn my paycheck*. Regardless, from the way I see it, fighting a war we can't win is a terrible business model. We need to be more efficient about how we do things; we need to use our capital more carefully.

We don't need the honor from the heroes of our past, but we should absolutely reap the benefits of whatever they left behind. Using our time and effort on a venture that can't be won is not much different from pissing away our careers. The more we kick and scream to try and salvage our emotional investment, the more our feet sink into the quagmire of defeat.

That being said, I don't want to open up loose ends in the department I'm trying to leave. It would be foolish for me to spare any effort to complete my resignation procedure before changing jobs.

As a human resource who always makes it a point to do her best, Tanya will remain subjective and appeal to her superior the best she can.

"If we kill General Rudersdorf, all we're left with is a single murder. But if we were to stop the mastermind behind a coup

d'état, it would serve a purpose in increasing our influence."

With General Zettour listening intently, now is my chance to sell this idea to him. This is no different than explaining a strategy. He holds the key; I just need to make him realize it.

"I would like to strongly suggest that we focus on devising a plan for what happens *after* we foil General Rudersdorf's Plan B."

"I see. We shouldn't remove the cancerous Rudersdorf, but…"

Precisely.

I give him a small nudge in the right direction.

"His death would trigger a selective purge of soldiers within the army. We can use the confusion to bring the Supreme High Command under the control of the General Staff Office and effectively create a short-term central command for the war."

"…A counter coup. This would be my…our…Plan B."

I find aggressive and decisive action to be most efficient. We'll be able to end the plot to overthrow the government and seize complete control over the war effort at the same time.

General Zettour grasps this within an instant, which fills his mind with one thing: hope.

"The mayhem may increase compared to merely taking Rudersdorf out of the picture…but it may help quell existing turmoil within the Empire."

This would bring us much closer to the original Plan B's goal of creating a central command. No, it will surely meet this goal. And legally, to boot.

"The bloodshed will be kept to a minimum. It will allow us to maximize our returns with as little effort as possible. It should be terribly easy, too."

"You make it sound simple. We'll be killing our own this time, Colonel. Do you understand what this means?"

He then shows a more morbid expression… I wonder what he isn't getting here. The premise has gone over General Zettour's head. Why would Tanya ever want to kill an *ally*?

"Excuse me, sir, but where exactly is the issue?"

"What? Wait, do you know what you are saying?"

"Sir, is there a reason to deploy my troops?"

I'll borrow what Cao Cao said during the conflict with the court eunuchs who eventually sliced up a certain butcher: *There is no need to summon the troops.*

A countercoup is fundamentally a display of power made in the

name of *law and order*.

"Military force is to be used against our enemies. The police should be more than enough."

If we're going to assault an enemy base in the east, then yes, we need to deploy combat engineers, mages, artillery, and infantry. But we aren't heading to the east for this one. Our target is an office in the Empire. A couple of peace officers in uniform should be more than enough.

"A single MP unit will be able to easily apprehend all of those involved in the coup."

"Are you suggesting we hand the General Staff over to…?"

General Zettour doesn't finish his sentence.

He instead closes his mouth and reaches for another one of his cheap cigarettes. Using a lighter that appears to be a recycled bullet cartridge, he quietly lights his tobacco. He looks to the ceiling every now and then and adds to the lingering cloud of smoke above. A short amount of time passes before he finally…comes to a conclusion.

"Not bad." He utters these two words to himself. "If we deploy our own troops, it will cause widespread panic. There's no reason our little surgical procedure…needs to be carried out by mages." He smirks, or maybe it is a sneer. General Zettour rubs his chin as he cheerfully exhales a big puff of smoke. "It seems my head is still in the east."

"You mean you're too used to fighting a war against barbarians?"

"Yes, that's right. I've become so immersed in the barbaric process of war that I forgot how to fight battles back home."

He chuckles at his unbecoming lack of judgment as his brilliant mind is likely filling in all the gaps at a blistering speed. The cigarette in my superior's mouth highlights his dastardly grin accompanied by the devilish gaze of a scheming child.

"If we can preemptively end this using only the MPs, then…"

The rest of the sentence is lost as he exhales a big cloud of smoke, but it's clear what he was going to say.

"We'll get exactly what we want, with little to no sacrifice on our part. Then we will be able to centralize our military's leadership during the trial."

General Zettour responds with a nod, then shoves his cigarette butt into his ashtray as if it were the most satisfying smoke he's

ever enjoyed before promptly taking out a new one. After quietly smoking for a moment longer, he then says something as if he is speaking to himself.

"…A secret feud will take place behind the closed doors within the Empire…"

"Yes, that's what needs to happen."

"Well, it's always better for surgical procedures to be as unintrusive as possible. So, tell me, with the board the way it is, what would your next move be?"

He asks this question as if he were a military academy professor. I almost feel like we're in a classroom on campus on a lovely afternoon.

Soldiers who come from an academic background are cut from a different cloth. We're talking about killing someone here, and he makes it sound so elegant in a way I never could.

"I want to hear your opinion, Colonel."

"I think we should start by drawing General Rudersdorf out of the General Staff Office and keep him somewhere where we can reach him."

Ideally, we make his death look like an accident. The purge would start after we find proof of the coup in the personal belongings that he leaves behind.

The most convenient circumstance would be for him to simply be killed in the line of duty, but there aren't any scenarios where the Deputy Director of the General Staff Office would expose himself to enemy attack. Even if we can draw him near the eastern front, how exactly would he end up dying there?

"Explain to me how you would do it."

"We need a reason to bring him to the eastern front without drawing attention…and figure out how we'll weather the shock that will inevitably rock the army."

Just as the study of urban economics dictates, there is a considerable advantage to be gained from proximity alone. This general principle applies to authority as well. A worker fears the boss who sits next to them, not the boss in a different office. So if we're going to make an accident happen, the east is the best location.

Not to mention…dying on the battlefield isn't what I would call unusual.

"Perhaps we can use Colonel Lergen to lure General Rudersdorf

to the east?"

"That can't be done."

The way I'm shot down without hesitation arouses my curiosity.

"Oh? Do you mind if I ask why?"

My superior shows a wry expression.

"We must bear in mind that Rudersdorf has Colonel Lergen working on a peace deal with Ildoa."

"Is that not a testament to his trust in the man?"

The fate of our nation rides on those negotiations. It only makes sense that he would put the man he trusts most on the job. My intuition tells me that General Rudersdorf places a great amount of faith in Colonel Lergen, but it seems General Zettour disagrees.

"Rudersdorf is merely going along with the negotiations as a compromise. It's not about Colonel Lergen's ability…but where he stands. He would have the colonel working on preparations for his Plan B if he truly trusted him."

"Trusted him to take his side?"

Precisely. General Zettour nods as he wedges yet another cigarette butt into his ashtray.

"I know from having the entire eastern front thrust upon me. His faith in people is proportional to how abusive his assignments are. He gives the worst of tasks to those he truly trusts."

There is a tone of pride in his speech, and it's painfully clear where this is going.

"Well, that makes this easy. Sir, excuse me, but…"

"You don't need to say it."

My smiling superior easily qualifies as the single most abused Imperial officer given how he's been forced to shoulder the fight against the Federation.

"You want me to do the dirty work, don't you?"

I silently affirm General Zettour's question with a nod, and he smiles back. It's a big, brimming smile.

Quite frankly, almost a bit too big. For a man about to kill one of his best friends…the way he then quietly whispers "very well" is rather gentle.

"How will we do this?"

That's the easy part.

"What if we arrange for an accident to occur while he's in the east? What do you think of a plane crash?"

"Those do happen every now and then."

“Yes. How unfortunate it would be if there was a maintenance issue.”

It is difficult to prevent accidents in an air transport network that is chronically overworked. This is considered quite problematic, and the Empire has taken ample precautions to study how to improve the reliability of our flights. However, during times of war, necessity is often prioritized over safety, with the occasional accident being the price we pay.

“I’ll have my troops make sure that there is an accident.”

General Zettour responds to this proposition with a moment’s silence. He clamps his lips on his next cigarette without saying a word before lighting it. After gently clouding the air around us, he vocalizes his concern together with another puff of smoke.

“It’s a good plan overall, but the plane crew will also be caught in the accident.”

He drops his fist onto the desk before continuing.

“You talk about minimal costs, but the crew will be our own soldiers. Soldiers who were assigned to the wrong plane, on the wrong day.”

What honorable words. He is completely correct in a humanitarian sense. I agree with him, I really do. The lives of others need to be held in the highest of regard. Even if this is a necessary procedure…tell that to the people whose lives are sacrificed.

I should be embarrassed by his criticism—by the way his glare rebukes my idea.

I should be, but I’m not. For it is General Zettour who made the remark.

“Sir, could you…”

“What is it?”

I don’t mind the look of disgust. You’re free to pretend to be a man of good principles if you so wish. In fact, the sentiment itself is worthy of praise. But, setting all this aside, I’m afraid I must point out…

“Could you please take a look in the mirror? Your jaw seems to be acting up.”

“Oh…oh?”

A slightly perplexed General Zettour begins to rub his jawline. I’m assuming what’s happening to him is entirely unconscious.

The real change happens, though, the moment his hand touches

his mouth. It could only be described as a dramatic change…the way the scorn in his eyes brightens up like a summer's day.

"I can't help but notice how pleased you seem about all this."

"…Is that the kind of face I'm making?"

Honestly, he looks like a serial killer doing what he enjoys most: murder. The joy is practically flowing from his gaping grin. There's little denying that my boss is essentially a highly capable, utterly relentless…psychopath.

"Yes…it appears your brilliant suggestion had me overjoyed. While I am aware of the crime we will commit, it seems I can't elude necessity's motherly push."

They truly are one and the same, Zettour and Rudersdorf.

From my perspective, the two of them are both loyal patriots—through and through—to the strange societal construct known as a nation. A point that I can't help but feel makes them both irrational beings, but…perhaps my viewpoint is influenced by the time and place I originally came from.

In any case, be it people from my times or these times, pandering is always a social constant.

"The deputy director is a great man."

He is a perfect strategist. This issue has never been his ability to strategize but his temperament. What the Empire needs now is someone who can manage our bankruptcy. It always makes me so sad when a mismatch in human resources such as this occurs.

This is why, the very least we can do for him is…

"He is a great man who I feel is suitable to become the foundation for the next hundred years of the Heimat."

Oh, how I wish I could take a picture of this wonderful smile on General Zettour's face! I think I can chalk up my appeal to my boss as a success.

"Colonel, should I thank you?"

"Only if you wish, sir."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha, what a great answer. Let us give praise to our mother."

My eyes open wide. I'm caught off guard by his remark.

"Our mother?"

What is he saying all of a sudden? General Zettour is always incredible… He's the ideal superior. Maybe it is due to the war, but as of late, sometimes he can act a bit strange. I occasionally have trouble responding to him, being the sensible person I am. In times

like these, I do what any social being would do and quietly hear him out.

"Yes, the mother who offers us her cruel embrace. If there is a god in this world, she is without a doubt Mother Necessity."

He's getting religious on me. Is he faithful to necessity? I guess in his religion, necessity is maternal.

"She is a cruel but mighty deity. Do you not agree?"

Being X is an egotistical piece of shit, but…if there truly is a Mother Necessity, then there's a good chance she is exactly as General Zettour described in his brief monologue.

"You may be right. That would make her the same as you."

"Come now, there's no need to pander to me. You're making me blush."

I lower my head in apology…though I'm a bit confused by the way my superior waves his hand to his as if he feels the need to physically brush away my praise.

Is he genuinely happy? Did he take that as a compliment? It would be quite terrifying if that's the case…

"All right, if the worst-case scenario ever comes into play, we will have Rudersdorf meet with an accident. I plan on returning to the imperial capital when that happens."

"What shall we do about making arrangements for the military police to move after the accident happens?"

I was ready to act as the messenger to a person General Zettour trusts should the need arise. Fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on how you look at it, this monster has his own way of doing things.

"I'll handle it. I can do that much from my office."

He says this like it's nothing, but the extent of his influence within the General Staff Office is truly impressive—a product of his long career. It makes me jealous. His record and experience give him options unavailable to a newer member of the organization like me.

Which reminds me of another question at the back of my mind.

"There's one more thing I'd like to confirm. You plan on parting with the eastern front, correct?"

"That is correct."

"Will this not spell trouble for our war effort in the east?"

The war front there is only sustainable thanks to General Zettour's cunning. The place this man has brought us with his

unique approach to tactics and strategy is nothing short of a miracle.

A change in leadership would be enough to bring this war to its inevitable conclusion.

"I assume we'll have to retreat as we won't be able to support the front line.

"…I can prepare a position for you if you're up for the job. I could make you a senior staffer at the very least."

"I've heard that keeping the troops battle-ready is a tall order even for inspectors with the rank of lieutenant general. But for a lieutenant colonel? I doubt I would be able to get anyone to heed any of my commands."

What I want to avoid most is becoming General Zettour's right-hand officer. It would be a bed of nails. I would be in a position to take responsibility for all the confusion of this war. And I definitely don't want that. Besides, I wouldn't be able to exercise any of my skills there. My talent would waste away as I partake in crushing negotiations.

People need to refuse jobs they know they can't do effectively. It can be difficult to do this in a logical company, but maintaining an environment where workers can say no is incredibly important for an organization.

"You don't see it happening?" General Zettour shoots Tanya a hopeful gaze, but he can't have his way. "I have high hopes for you. I'm sure this is a point of pride for you?" He presses the request again.

"Is there anything I can do for the eastern front outside of leaving it as well? Honestly, I don't think there is a single soul in the Empire who could take it over for you."

Quite frankly, I just can't see anyone, even the most capable of successors like General Romel or even General Rudersdorf, being able to fill General Zettour's shoes. The situation is far too complicated. There's no winning move for Tanya or anyone else to make as the commanding officer there.

The most she would be able to do is keep damages to a minimum. And to do even this, her only choice would be to slowly retreat so that her Kampfgruppe wouldn't get caught out of position in the ensuing confusion.

In that same vein, I should also ask what level of damage my superior is willing to accept in order to evade said confusion.

“Either way, we need to contain the chaos of the eastern front. I believe the situation there, which has a strong spillover potential into our home country and the entire war front, should be decisively stopped.”

“You have nothing to worry about in regards to that. There is still space in the east that I created.”

Hearing General Zettour say this gives me a different idea.

I remember the organization General Zettour created to govern our conquered territories. It’s a vicious organization, a council that touts the dream of *independence* to the many minorities that make up the Federation.

“Could we use the Council for Self-Government for a deep operation…?”

“I know I created it for such a purpose, but I doubt they could manage it now.”

He’s probably right, so I simply nod.

The council was a rushed project, after all. They would never rise to the occasion on their own. What power they did have was backed by the assurance that the Imperial Army would squash any real opposition.

“The foundation for their existence lies in the Imperial Army holding the front line. They can’t do more than maintain public order in the regions I’ve placed them.”

The most they could do beyond that is handle logistics in the rear.

“Do you have faith in them?”

“No, but I do have faith in the Federation.”

“…That they will do something to make the Council for Self-Government view them as their mortal enemy?”

General Zettour nods silently. The Council for Self-Government’s understanding that the Empire has no territorial ambition is based on pragmatism and national raison d’état.

“If you’ve thought it out that far, we could just firebomb everything.”

“That won’t work, Colonel. There’s too much land to cover in the east…”

General Zettour then expresses his inner defeatist.

“There’s no need for us to sow the seeds of hatred.”

“If we win, they will be called loyalists.”

“*If* being the operative word.”

We both know the chances of this are slim, reducing this entire conversation to mere banter.

“Those are mighty strong words to hear from a lieutenant general.”

“Do you want me to tell you we’ll win? Then, Colonel, I’ll need you to fight hard for our victory.”

“I spoke without tact. Please forgive me.”

He nods and we both sigh. This is what it means to accept our unfortunate reality, our bitter fate.

“This is why, Colonel, things may get tough for your troops.”

“Well…that’s how it always is and has been.”

“Then please, do continue.”

This country is black.

We’re doused in our own blood, which has oxidized to a jet black. As much as I love being in the black, I’m not a fan of breaking the law or exploitative systems.

Damn this forsaken world to hell.

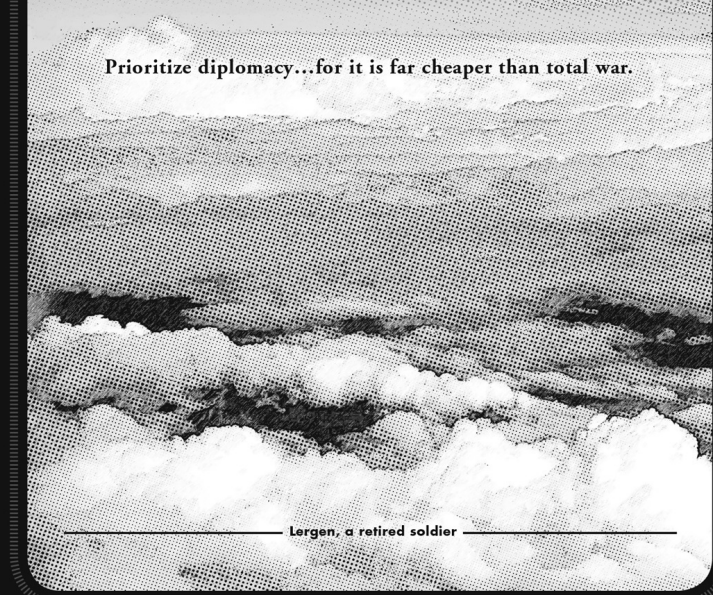
“I’ll do what I can.”

“Perfect, let blood flow in the name of necessity.”

[chapter]

II

Memoir



Prioritize diplomacy…for it is far cheaper than total war.

Lergen, a retired soldier

[chapter] II Memoir

THE UNPUBLISHED MEMOIRS OF ERICH VON LERGEN (AN EX-IMPERIAL OFFICER)

As I write these memoirs, there is a certain sentiment I want make clear to future readers.

I… All of us truly believed in our nation's cause: that the Empire was a true and honorable driving force behind attaining world peace. This was a misjudgment on our parts, and one with terrible consequences. Thus, my memoirs will tell the story of my failure. They are the woes of a loser who failed his mission.

The first mistake I was confronted with took place in Ildoa. Even now when I introduce myself as Lergen in Ildoa, it will always be received with disgruntled looks. A happy face loses its smile, and the hand I offer for a handshake gets left lingering the air.

It's always saddening, but also not unwarranted for a very simple reason. You see, the name Lergen carries the same meaning as the word *crook* here. And as much as it pains me to say this, I can fully understand why.

It was unavoidable, really, what happened during the war. I'm embarrassed to hide behind loaded terms like *unavoidable* or *duty*, or the idea that a certain action is simply *what needed to be done*. My only wish in writing this is to leave a sincere historical record, and if there ever is a historian eccentric enough to hold interest in these ramblings, then perhaps they will get something out of what I'm writing today. Or maybe even more so, what I choose *not* to write. For you see, I am a man who lacks both tact and a place to call home, which makes me doubt I'll ever be able to shake off this

reputation of being a conniving snake.

Nevertheless, I think I'll follow the example of an Imperial officer I once served under and let my pen do the talking. I can still remember how it all began. It was just after I became aware that the end was near, when it became evident victory wasn't in the cards. At the time, I was a colonel serving in the General Staff Office, working on what I was told was a top priority for the war effort: organizing an armistice with Ildoa as the mediator.

Thinking back on it, the idea that we could ever sign an armistice was nothing more than an internal ploy to appease those outside the project. For the handful of people working with me on this objective, I imagine the majority of us recognized that our true goal was to end the war by any means necessary.

I can only laugh at my past self as I write this down, but it was a terrible position to be in. My job was to hang my head down low and apologize as I *petitioned for peace*. It was, unfortunately, a duty I couldn't pass on to another officer…and a black mark on my past.

Winning prestige through peace negotiations was far from what the Empire originally envisioned for its victorious end to the war. You could argue all day that attaining world peace was a true victory, but it would fall on deaf ears.

I bet some of you are wondering why they would even send a soldier to work on peace deals in the first place. And, well, you would be right in questioning the very idea. Setting aside the differences between how the Reich used to operate and how things are now…a soldier is a soldier. It isn't a soldier's job to participate in politics or diplomacy. This was an egregious deviation from what the army was meant to do. Putting the source of all violence at the top of a nation will only damage it. It induces an irredeemable reversal in which government bows to the military, thus forcing the nation off track.

We knew this. At the same time, as regretful as it was, I remember how the discourse at the General Staff Office was always phrased like we stood at the head of the national strategy. Just as Zettour the Terror's name has been etched into the annals of history, there is a lot to be misunderstood about him.

The latter half of the war saw many irregular, extreme cases. So it is completely understandable that there would be some misunderstandings, especially in those final days. By then, the Empire's military and the government had merged into a single

entity. This progression was gradual, with military and political affairs becoming one and the same. Maybe it's not so much that they combined…but more like they were jumbled together into one big mess. There is a discussion to be had about the General Staff Office becoming a nation unto itself within the Empire.

And thus, the Reich became a ship without a captain, leaving the General Staff with the burden of leading the entire nation. And, as fortunate or unfortunate as this may be, Zettour the Terror was just as capable of steering his country as he was at strategizing. This was why General Zettour would become unanimous with the Empire in the nation's final hours.

It was a fleeting part of the country's history, but let me be clear about this…it wasn't something that was ever intended. I know because I was there, and this is my testimony for future generations. I believe the reason why I'm still alive today is to share this.

Allow me to start by saying this with absolute certainty—*the general never had any aspirations to become a dictator*. He merely did what needed to be done. Just like all the millions of nameless soldiers who died on the battlefield to be forever forgotten by history, he simply carried out his duty. The Heimat absolutely needed the general to become a cog in its machine. His rise, however, was an *exception* in the build-up to the nation's collapse. Even until just before the Empire declared bankruptcy, the majority of us soldiers hadn't even imagined that the military was in a position to lead foreign policy.

Certainly, most people would question, *Why a soldier, of all people?* Which was how I also reacted at first. A soldier's job is to fight for their nation. The Empire's army and its soldiers were like Reich's fists. We senior staff officers definitely never thought of ourselves as its brain, though we were occasionally accused of doing so. We were often ridiculed as a bunch of arrogant office workers with our legs kicked up on our desks, but…it was the opposite, really. We were far too intellectual—and humble—to ever consider creating our own nation within a nation.

But, as I said, I must recognize that this was an exception. I was the very soldier who had the unfortunate fate of being haplessly dragged into the plot to end the war—a task that would make every Ildoan consider me a vile spider to this day.

Anyway, my prologue has dragged on for far too long. I'm sure

my readers wish to learn the answer to the initial question: Why would an imperial soldier ever conduct diplomatic negotiations to end the war?

You'll have to forgive my roundaboutness, something unbecoming of a senior staff officer. I was never one to discuss history. I should start by giving a detailed description of the chain of events that led up to this.

The simplest answer is that there was no one else who could do what we did. The only organization in the Empire that could conceptualize our nation's defeat was the General Staff Office's inner circle because they stood at the very heart of the army. Please take a moment to remember that up until the war, the Empire had never known defeat. This conclusive difference from the present, however small it may seem, held the Empire back at the time. Setting aside the countless losses on the battlefield—a cause for rivers of tears at the General Staff Office—we always found a way to win the war in the end.

It was what defined the Reich of old. The Empire had a powerful army, the most powerful army in the world. All diplomacy was with its military and economic might. Our formidability as a superpower was what did the talking for us.

I imagine it's probably difficult for the younger generation to picture this. The Reich today is a husk of what it used to be. It's only natural for people to learn from their mistakes, though. Those who survived the Reich accepted that it lost the war. But that certainly wasn't the case back then.

Back then, during the war.

The Empire never conducted diplomacy under the pretense that we would lose a war. You can even go as far as to say that the very notion of defeat went against every fiber of our collective being. This went for the officials at the Foreign Office as well. After all, those who have not experienced impending defeat tend to be a combination of escapists and optimists.

Soldiers were no exception, either, even those soldiers fighting *in* the war. It took the army an incredible amount of time and infighting to comprehend its inevitable defeat.

I doubt I would've been able to properly give up hope myself had I not visited the front with the Lergen Kampfgruppe. War is always at the mercy of the laws of physics. A particular memory of mine will always serve as a reminder of this.

It was a shocking sight I witnessed on the eastern front. A young officer from my Kampfgruppe had approached me…a far-too-young officer, thinking back on it. War tears through a country's adult population, forcing its children to take their place. In any case, that young officer brought me to inspect the remains of one of the Federation's main battle tanks that had been destroyed only moments earlier.

I'd read about their tanks in various reports and assumed I knew what we were dealing with. Seeing the real thing, however, was worth a million reports. When I arrived at the scene, my brain failed to process how the young soldiers could possibly disable such a steel monstrosity. The machine was something from a myth, and they had taken it out with lunge mines. The sight forced me to recognize that even as one of the younger colonels, the image of war I had in my mind was long outdated.

The tanks I was familiar with were toys. You could incapacitate them with enough anti-tank rifles. However, the behemoth I saw on the battlefield was something that I felt even an aerial mage would have trouble handling. It would most certainly require high-caliber guns.

I was overwhelmed by the reality of the war; it made me realize how out of touch I was. It was why I was so taken aback by the many dangers I witnessed on the front lines. This experience taught me that the world we officers read about in the reports from the rear bore little resemblance to the real world, where men were using mines mounted on sticks to blow armor off tanks.

While I'd hardly call us fortunate, these hellish scenes baptized many of us on the front lines and helped us keep our heads in the real world. Of course, there were also many of us who would never realize this, despite standing on the battlefield…

I did everything in my power to enlighten my peers in the rear, to very little effect. I still hold nothing but thanks in my heart for those who understood my plea and lent me their strength. It's all too easy to forget the innumerable number of people who gave their all for the nation despite the dark days we found ourselves in. Some of these men and women would lose their lives on the battlefield, becoming another statistic. Others would carry out their duty knowing they would go down in history as traitors. And others would give their everything to the Heimat.

I'm not sure what I should say as someone who survived these

brethren of mine. If it sounds to the reader that I have access to some sort of profound knowledge, well, that is because you weren't there. At the time, my insight was more like a curse than anything else.

I and those around me could hear the approaching footsteps of collapse, but we had no way to run or even figure out a way to fight back. Those were truly dark days, with no way out.

Even the Foreign Office decided that the consideration of peace deals was too scandalous to be kept under wraps within its department, and it would be too dangerous if word got out. This is why the push to end the war was kept between the two generals, Zettour and Rudersdorf, and a handful of agents within the army. We all believed this was the one and only path for the Empire to come out of the war intact. And I…was one of those few agents.

For this very reason, I still have thanks in my heart for the few others who understood our cause from within. I had help from one competent and sincere imperial diplomat, in particular, who played a major part in starting the effort. His help was an unexpected source of comfort for me at the time. Counselor Conrad was my good friend… Perhaps I should call him my comrade in arms. He offered me helpful advice as I approached the negotiations with Ildoa.

"Colonel Lergen, allow me to give you a few pointers."

Counselor Conrad always spoke with the same steady, even tone of voice. The career diplomat gleamed with a sort of pre-war elegance as he continued with his aristocratic demeanor.

"Diplomacy seems flexible, but it is actually quite rigid. That being said, it is also, by and large, ever-flowing. Please understand that at the core of diplomacy exists a delicate balance between justice and reasonable compensation."

Hearing his advice, I eagerly nodded to show that I understood. As a staff officer who'd never even thought about diplomacy, I wanted all the advice I could get. His next piece of advice would definitely catch me off guard, though.

"Be aware that words like *cheater* or *crook* carry no meaning in diplomatic affairs."

I remember laughing in response to this. It didn't even seem worth mentioning. *Cheater*? *Crook*? Those two words had been erased from my dictionary and replaced with the word *necessity* long ago. This much seemed obvious enough to me. Being

inexperienced in all things political…this was the last thing on the mind of a staff officer who shouldered the fate of possibly losing the Reich and Heimat.

I asked for more advice, and Counselor Conrad obliged with a knowing look.

"I want you to use everything in your arsenal to find that balance I mentioned…"

I then asked him how far I should go, at which the career diplomat barked a bold laugh.

"When I say everything, I mean everything. Lying? Cheating? Deception? None of it matters. In terms of creating something from nothing, diplomacy is… It's like alchemy in a way."

I tried to draw a parallel between that idea and General Zettour's trickery on the eastern front, but my analogy was shot down instantly.

"War is the exception. Diplomacy is the norm. As long as our country exists, we must negotiate with the rest of the world's nations. Schemes and tricks can be convenient, but they are just seasoning. The most important ingredient is *trust*."

Well, now you're contradicting yourself. I laughed with him.

He was suggesting doing everything in my power while prizing trust. This was a strange concept that felt incompatible to me, but he was dead serious.

"It's a matter of priorities. As trust is of the utmost importance, you must do whatever it takes to gain their trust. Throw whatever you need at them—be it a person or a thing—mix it into the pot and serve them."

The diplomat spoke about trust like it was an ingredient. While I thought it was a somewhat inhumane way to phrase things, I nodded in agreement. I understood that trust was the weapon I would need to fight the battle of diplomacy. If this was what I needed to arm myself with, then I would prepare as much as possible. A good conscience would stop most people from using trust as a weapon, but unfortunately, a good conscience is often betrayed by the needs of reality.

One thing was clear: I was listening very intently to Counselor Conrad's words from the perspective of an officer who'd experienced hot war. For as we spoke, the Empire—the Reich that no longer exists—was pouring its men and women of all ages into the war front. The Heimat didn't even allow its people to sleep. O,

ancestors. Please let these heroes without a voice be at rest. I'd done everything I could to end our mistake and I was ready to do anything else required.

This was why I, an officer about to head into my own battle, was so eager to receive more advice from Counselor Conrad. And he obliged me with his crystal-clear words.

"If you have trust, then the door to negotiations will be open. The general rule for these negotiations is that they must be *just* and the terms *fair*. Or, at least, each party must *trust* that they are."

Counselor Conrad stopped himself as he was about to reach a critical point. I'm sure my dear friend Conrad had little reason to consider whether his words would shock me. After all, we were both passengers on the same boat with the misfortune of being caught in this storm. We were both kicking and screaming as we tried to find a way to keep our ship afloat. This is why I know now that Counselor Conrad was trying to give me some bad news back then. Unfortunately, I couldn't pick up on the hints he was giving me at the time.

"Though you must have trust as your foundation, you'll also need to use everything at your disposal for the actual negotiations. Your counterpart will do the same. All that's left are the interests of your respective nations."

Regarding that point, I believe I agreed with him outright, in a way that left no room for misunderstandings. At the very least, I knew I needed to protect our country's interests and that wars are fought against opponents. This much I knew. I always performed well in both war games and actual combat. It was a point of pride for me. But performing well gives you nothing more than a good performance. There were droves of officers who could do just as well as I could in the same position. Younger staff officers could do it. But the most drastic example of them all was the officer who came to be known as Zettour the Terror.

As a man who was there to witness the General handle the war like it was his own box of toys, I can say that I have less pride in my talent and more appreciation—though not without qualms—for the systematic education I'd endured and standards I was held to as a part of his organization.

His leadership was what burned the Reich and the Heimat to ashes. Just as *necessity* dictated it should. Whether or not this was a good thing or a mistake is a question that will plague me until the

end of my days.

Anyway, I've gotten a bit off track. At the time, I understood my diplomat friend's advice as an elementary lesson on making a bargain.

"This goes for more than just Ildoa. The ingredients they place on their scale will occasionally differ from ours."

I attempted to equate this with the war again, but this didn't seem to resonate with Counselor Conrad. It was clear we weren't on the same page. In this regard, Counselor Conrad was as ruthless with me as he likely was with his coworkers. Like a professor taking his time to spell out his lesson for a lackluster student, he went to the trouble of giving a more in-depth explanation.

"If war is reality in its truest form, then diplomacy is fantasy in its truest form. I want you to pay close attention to the scale. Sometimes both parties may have a different understanding of what is on the scale."

He said something to this effect, I believe. Whatever the case may have been, I showed that I understood him with yet another enthusiastic nod. Unfortunately for the Reich, we staff officers had a natural defect. I myself wasn't anything close to an exception in this regard.

This foolish flaw lay in our perspective. We were trained to analyze all things in military terms. This applied to politics as well. Our warped outlook placed war before politics. Politics were simply another part of war for us. This was a grave defect for us staff officers.

I doubt even Counselor Conrad's sharp intellect could see through our boundless stupidity.

As I appeared to have followed his advice, he offered me a smile before giving me a strong pat on the back.

"I pray things go well for you. If the army is able to pave a path for us, we'll take care of the rest."

"You make me feel like the armor in a mechanized infantry unit," I replied.

The army *tank* would lead the charge and the diplomat *foot soldiers* would follow and take control of the battlefield. As a soldier, this was a very familiar approach. I'd done this many times on the eastern front; it was the same as any other battle I'd overcome with my Kampfgruppe. Whether it be on the battlefield or via diplomacy, it's always people who do the work.

The goal for both is also quite similar… I remember giving off a look of satisfaction that showed my confidence in reaching this conclusion. My meeting with Counselor Conrad would greatly influence me in my acceptance of my new duty. I'm still grateful to Counselor Conrad and the guidance he gave me that day. His advice was worth an entire division of soldiers. But, sadly…what I needed was a whole new branch of the military. For in war, God smiles on the side with more troops. Nevertheless, the most battle-hardened soldiers occasionally pull off the implausible, which was what I had to do as I made my way to Ildoa.

I think I'll take this chance to write down my thoughts on the trip. I'd like to talk about the physical route to Ildoa in particular. It was a route I would take many times due to the unfortunate circumstances I found myself in. My path to Ildoa involved highways and train lines that spanned cities. The means of transportation were, for better or worse, in excellent condition. The roads were well-maintained, perfect for a swift armored spearhead should it come to that. However, it's hard to describe the trip as one that could be unconditionally enjoyed. I don't mean this in a physical sense, though I am talking about the physical route… Please forgive my inability to articulate this well.

Now, where should I start? At the time, both countries were connected via an international railroad. The swaying of the train on either side of the border was an unfortunate reminder of each country's state. The railroad on the Empire's side was a shaky, wobbly mess, while the pleasant sway on the Ildoan side proved to be quite comfy. The difference was obvious as soon as the train crossed the border.

It was the kind of trip that took your melancholy and turned it into a deep depression. Before the war, the Empire was proud of its railroads, which were far superior to Ildoa's. This glaring change alone was enough to make a young patriot feel sick. And once the train emerged from the mountain range that separated the two countries, what awaited on the other side was…a whole new world—a world with bright, bright lights.

I know that sounds strange, but I would like for you to understand that at the time, Ildoa had remained largely unaffected by the war. Thus, their population continued to sing the song of peace. This reality could be witnessed no matter where I went.

The sun, its people, the city lights—this country just south of

the Empire was so dazzling in so many different ways. The streets were open, there were no inspections, and what's more, you were free to drive around in your own car. It was a peaceful world where even the idea of blackouts during bomber raids was alien.

The source of this light was their neutrality. At the time, I was like a zombie stumbling over from the doom and gloom that hung over the Empire, and there was something inside me that made the term *neutrality* unbearable. I can admit now this feeling was my own jealousy. I assume this would've been the natural reaction for any downtrodden Imperial citizen who stepped foot into the world of never-ending spring that was Ildoa. Ildoa truly played their cards right.

While I doubt any Ildoan readers would be happy to hear that coming from me, it was the honest truth. They were doing so well at the time.

Objectively speaking, the Ildoan government deserves high praise for its efforts to keep its people prosperous and safe during the war. Many Ildoans criticize their current government and military without realizing this. What a terrible misunderstanding they are making. I'd like to speak on behalf of its officials, who are often the object of discontent for what only seem to be operational mistakes and blunders in hindsight.

Again, I doubt they would be happy to hear my praises…but I must write the truth. I understand why, of course. Historically, the country was not without its devastating losses on the battlefield. But they were geniuses when it came to preventing conflict. On the other hand, the Empire surely had our own share of geniuses when it came to *treatment*. But please understand that prevention is always better than treatment. This difference kept the Empire at war while Ildoa enjoyed its long period of peace.

I have one particular episode that exemplifies the large divide between the two countries. While I know it may seem insignificant, let me confess here how difficult it was to find a gift for my diplomatic mission. While I may have been there on official business, the diplomatic nature of my visit made my visit a bit more personal. And let me tell you, the Ildoans spared no expense when it came to gifts.

Whenever I visited Ildoa, they showered me with the most wonderful gifts. Their abundance was always on display. Though the exchange of gifts is partly a personal exchange, the nature of the

gifts can often symbolize the country's power and stance.

Even if it was a sham, the Empire's gift couldn't be inferior to its counterpart's.

It was all for show—a way to save face. In other words, we needed to maintain the outward appearance of a superpower.

I know how silly it may seem, but nations were used to such exercises, and as a result, it was expected that I come up with a proper gift. It didn't help that I wasn't a diplomat by trade. Thinking about what gift I should bring next always gave me a headache.

My counterpart, Colonel Calandro, on the other hand…was born and raised in the wealthy center of Ildoa. The grandiose *small gestures* he would prepare made my job particularly challenging. Nevertheless, I needed a gift suitable for the monumental proposal I was about to make.

This all may sound like one big joke, but let me assure you, it tore away at me. It wasn't an issue with the budget. The General Staff was prepared to spend as much as it needed on the peace negotiations. The problem was that there was no longer a physical gift to purchase. I couldn't just make a trip to the black market and spend public funds there. I needed to make a proper purchase, which…well, wasn't easy, to say the least.

I was so miserable that I'll confess: I essentially had to steal my gift. You may know of the high society that once existed in the old Empire's royal palace. The parties and events these people used to hold were beyond extravagant. The Foreign Office and palace would host the most incredible banquets. They made sure no expense was spared when it came to ensuring their guests had a good time in the name of creating trust. I feel those ideals are still fundamentally true, even today. When a diplomat is working hard to cultivate a friendship with a foreign nation, this is something that should be encouraged. It is much cheaper to fill diplomats with drinks than it is to fight a war, after all. As a soldier, I can assure you that diplomatic offensives are far more cost-effective than total war.

Anyway, let's get back to my nation's high society. Wine was a must when it came to these gorgeous parties; both the palace and Foreign Office had wine cellars. A little investigation was all it took to find out that the palace still had a stock of wine.

So, what do you think a staff officer would do in this situation?

I feel it should be obvious enough. I'll come clean; I used my authority as a staff officer to plunder the imperial palace. A power move of sorts.

Although, it's not as if bringing a gift made my visit welcome. For you see, Ildoa was a neutral state. From the perspective of other countries, having an Imperial staffer like myself saunter around their city in broad daylight could only mean trouble. So whenever I visited, they were always quick to whisk me off the train.

The Ildoan officials were waiting for me at the station to both act as guides and keep an eye on me. A group of some of their tougher-looking soldiers would show up in uniform to bring me to my hotel, where they would keep me. They were, of course, as courteous as could be throughout the entire ordeal.

Thanks to their persistent effort, I made little to no contact with the outside world while I was there. I recall knowing the face of the staff member who would always check me into my hotel. I'm reasonably sure they were an intelligence operative for the Royal Ildoan Army.

They were also insistent about having me use their room service. It's not as if I was particularly interested in mingling with the other hotel guests in the dining hall…but it was exceedingly easy to tell how much they didn't want me to.

All this being said, I could've easily ignored their desires. I was an Imperial citizen, and Ildoa was our ally. Though they were neutral, there was no law forbidding a citizen of an allied nation from walking through the city streets. But I was compelled to comply. I needed them to cooperate with me, and acting up wasn't going to help.

I should also mention that—perhaps in an effort to keep me entertained in my hotel room and away from public eyes—Colonel Calandro was always very quick to visit me.

That day was no exception.

I had checked into my hotel just past midday, and it was just as I was about to place my bag down after reaching my room when the Ildoan security told me that Colonel Calandro was here to see me. Soon after, I heard my old friend's firm knock. The Ildoan soldier peeked his gruff face through the door, and I can still remember the weight of the first words that left his lips.

"Let me tell you, Igor Gassman is shaking in his boots. He's afraid of more trouble."

Although this sounded like a friendly jest, it was very evident he said it to keep me in check. Sadly, I could only brush off the remark and approach him for a handshake.

The two of us smiled as we exchanged a firm shake.

"My apologies to General Gassman, but…I'm hoping we'll be able to work closely together from here on out."

I think he was a bit surprised by my quip, but evidently, I had a knack for these kinds of exchanges. I always wanted to solve issues without creating new problems. I once had an instructor place on my evaluation that I was *of an average demeanor*, though I'm not sure if that was a good or bad thing for a staff officer.

Whichever the case may be, I managed to catch the Ildoan soldier off guard.

"I'm surprised. You almost sound like a diplomat."

There it was—praise. Diplomacy is all about verbal tactics. You want to praise someone while also taking them by surprise.

"But…you're a soldier. And a staff officer at that. I'm sure you must be somewhat upset about getting involved with diplomatic affairs."

I could hardly believe it myself, considering my past. I nodded in embarrassment, recalling once boasting that soldiers were soldiers and *not* diplomats to the very man before me.

"I'm still a soldier, Colonel Calandro."

"Of course."

"But alas, my country needs me here."

We finished exchanging what I guess you could call our salutations. Or, more aptly, an exchange of irony meant to keep each other in check. It all seemed so roundabout to me, and it seemed like I wasn't the only one who felt that way. Colonel Calandro was also a soldier, and one who preferred speaking plainly at that.

That was why he jumped right into that day's topic:

"…I hear you come with an important matter."

I had alerted the Ildoan military stationed in the Empire beforehand that I would be visiting with a critical proposal. We General Staff officers have a penchant for doing things by the book, for better or worse. It's always ideal to progress plans on the rails that have been laid out for them.

The main issue is whether or not the rails follow the same track as the plan.

“Let’s be frank. What are the terms you’ve prepared?”

Colonel Calandro’s expression was dreadfully serious as he asked this, which is why I assumed the odds were in my favor. With utmost confidence…I shared the terms I’d squeezed out of the Imperial Army and General Staff as if I were slamming a series of trump cards onto the table.

“There are three key points: no reparations, no annexation, and the self-determination of peoples.”

This was the limit of what the Empire could accept. In fact, it heavily tested those limits. These terms were one whole step beyond what most would consider fair within the Empire. Many of my peers in the General Staff Office considered the proposal to be dangerously pacifist. It would’ve caused mayhem throughout the Empire if these terms had leaked before the final plan was put together. I had to make a conscious effort to keep my voice from wavering.

I almost felt like my work there was done as soon as I finished saying the sentence. It felt oddly refreshing. And my Ildoan counterpart’s expression seemed…pretty good from where I was standing.

At that moment, I had a bit of hope.

“That’s a…mighty big proposal coming from the Empire in its current state. But…I’m sorry, you’re telling me this is the tentative plan for your negotiations?”

There was a stark color of surprise in Colonel Calandro’s expression. I thought this was a good sign. I had interpreted this as him understanding the Empire’s earnestness and willingness to make concessions.

“…I believe it should be more than enough for your country to mediate peace across the continent.”

It was a proposal to end the war. Something everyone at the time dreamed of, and it could finally come true. This was the way to make it possible. I truly believed that the end of the war was in arm’s reach for the Empire.

I was surprised to see a spark of confusion in the colonel’s eyes.

“With just this…? I’m not so sure about that. To start off with, do you really think reconciliation will be possible without reparations?”

“The Empire is willing to accept it. We’ll pledge never to request compensation.”

“Forgive me, but I might have heard incorrectly. I didn’t think my Imperial was this rusty…but did you just say the *Empire* is willing to accept these terms…?”

In fluent Imperial, a shocked Colonel Calandro suddenly questioned this detail. I remember feeling like this response must’ve meant that the terms I prepared were shockingly good. I could see it in his eyes…the raw emotion in his gaze. He was absolutely in awe by what I was saying. I thought to myself, *He probably never saw this coming, not in a million years.*

I knew I needed to capitalize on the moment as I gave him the firmest of nods. It was our chance to pave a path to peace. I won’t lie: In that moment, I had a strong, fleeting hope that this would work out.

“That is correct. We’re ready to accept this across the board. We won’t demand reparations or annex any of the land we’ve occupied. We’ll leave it to the people to decide which nation they want to join with a vote.”

This was an important point. It was an obvious mistake the Empire often made. Our diplomacy up until that point sought to push for the greatest benefit we could take for ourselves. What we needed to do this time was decide on a bare minimum and *make sure that we got it.*

This was why I thought the confused look on Colonel Calandro’s face affirmed my belief that these negotiations would bear fruit.

“I-I’m sorry. Colonel Lergen. Let me ask this one more time. Allow me to be overly clear with my question so as to avoid any misunderstanding.”

“Of course.”

“Perfect,” he said before explaining his question.

“The reparations you’re proposing are not a rejection of the Empire’s willingness to *pay* reparations, but an assertion that the Empire *will not pay* them?”

Though it was an informal meeting…I had laid out the absolute best terms with which the Imperial Army was willing to let us bargain. But for whatever reason, Colonel Calandro wasn’t capable of understanding this.

What was going on?

“That’s right… Wait, why are you asking something like that?”

“So your country has no intentions of paying reparations?”

He asked me this with a troubled look, and I couldn't process it. I think I probably just stared blankly at him. What he had just asked was beyond my realm of comprehension. The moment the meaning of his words eventually sank in, I stared right at him and finally spoke in disbelief.

"Us? Pay reparations?"

"…Colonel Lergen. I need to ask if you're being serious with me here."

"I would never joke about something as important as this. As an Imperial citizen who prays only for peace, I believe I have come up with the best plan we can offer."

We gave each other a good look, and both of us noticed the confusion in the other's eyes.

Something was very wrong.

I wanted to shout at him how ludicrous it was to even entertain the mere notion of the Empire paying reparations. In fact, we were fully in our rights to demand them. The Entente Alliance and François Republic had started the war. The Empire was merely defending itself. We had only been pursuing victory in a defensive war.

Ildoa, however, didn't see it the same way as the Empire.

"You can't be serious. You want to end the war by demanding exemption from compensating the other nations?"

“What’s not to understand?” I exclaimed with an unintended overzealousness. “We’re saying that we won’t charge them! Do you have any idea how much of a compromise this is? And yet it isn’t enough?”

“…Yes. And what’s this about forgoing annexation?”

“We’re going to forfeit our right to the territories we’ve acquired. We intend to show the Reich has no desire to conquer new land!”

It was a simple concept. Definitely not something that could be misconstrued. Or so I thought. This was why I started to feel frustrated about how much we seemed to be talking past each other.

“So…you’re going to abandon the contested territories? And not give up any of your own?”

“If there is a need, we can have the people decide! But that is only for the territories we acquired from the war!”

I should probably admit here that I was confused and scared in that moment. I tried raising my voice, but I’m sure my tone lacked any power or impact. We were talking past each other. And on topics that were the crux of the negotiations, no less.

“…Excuse me, but are you saying this after what happened in Arene? Do you know how many anti-Imperial separatists are still there today?”

“It isn’t as if we did anything illegal there.”

“And for the so-called self-determination of peoples, by this do you mean you want the people who live in the territories to decide which nation they want to be a part of?”

“That is correct. Is there something wrong with that?”

I remember thinking this as we exchanged those words: *There was nobody in the Empire who could’ve predicted a conversation like this would ever happen.* The fact was, I personally never foresaw this coming. I figured the Ildoans would either be happy to help end the war or betray us for their own gain—one of the two. Anything beyond that was beyond my and the Empire’s wildest imaginations. Unlike what I’d planned for, the Ildoan colonel reacted with confusion.

Colonel Calandro extended a hand to a pitcher on his desk and, with a heavy sigh, poured himself a glass of water. After a bit of

rehydration, he then reached for a cigar before stopping himself.

"Colonel Lergen, let's tone the formality down a notch and really talk with each other here. We're both soldiers. I think we can afford to be a bit more candid."

As he asked me to be franker with him, he held out a pack of military cigarettes. I remember it being the official brand of cigarettes used by the Ildoan Army. I took one out of the box and wedged it between my lips. We then both took out our lighters and lit our cigarettes. The two of us, both utterly exhausted, took a smoke break together.

A smell filled the room—not the elegant fragrance you'd expect in a diplomatic space. As I filled my lungs with the fragrance that I was all too painfully familiar with, Colonel Calandro took on an even more severe gaze as he spoke to me.

"I want to talk to you as a fellow soldier. Not as a diplomat."

"But of course. Let's clear the air."

Precisely. Colonel Calandro nodded with his cigarette in his mouth.

"I feel like there is a gap in our understanding of the situation. I'm sorry to say this so many times, but if this is all some sort of cruel joke you are trying to make, I'd really prefer you'd be more direct with me."

What do you say? he asked with inquisitive eyes. As a staff officer, this request was deeply confusing.

"Both personally and as a soldier, I believe I'm speaking with you in as simple terms as possible."

I was nothing but sincere with him. There were no lines to read between; it was all laid out on the table—as clear as day. There was nothing about the proposal that could possibly be cause for confusion. The Empire wanted peace, and the General Staff of the Imperial Army wanted to dispel any notion to the contrary.

"We are seriously proposing that there should be no reparations paid and no annexation of territories, and that the populations in contested areas should be given the right to self-determination. I hope you can see the Empire's sincerity in our proposal."

"So this is a proposal that outlines the extent to which the Empire is willing to concede."

I nodded. It was hard to get these terms even with the General Staff.

"Exactly. We won't ask for reparations. Nor will we occupy our

territories. What's more, we'll leave the determination of our colonies to their people. We're willing and prepared to do all of this."

It wasn't a joke or some sort of bargaining ploy. The Empire was willing to concede far more than it should, considering how much of a fight we had put up at the time. This…accurately reflected the sentiment of our people.

"So that's how you all see it."

The exhaustion in Colonel Calandro's face reached new heights as he lamented to himself. He then peered up to the ceiling as if the words he was searching for were hidden up there. It was a crude gesture, considering how elegant he always was. But I will never be as shocked as when I heard what he said next.

"The nations of the world will view this proposal as an insult."

I responded immediately.

"In what way?"

"You're not going to pay for damages or give up any land and to top it all off, this will spark new problems in the contested regions. From the perspective of your enemies, your offer reads like you're making a mockery of them. I'm sorry, Colonel Lergen, but did you really not predict this outcome…?"

I couldn't believe my ears. In fact, it was even worse than not believing. My brain couldn't process his assertion.

"My apologies, Colonel Lergen. I can tell by the look on your face that you haven't even considered the idea."

"I…" was all I could eke out before going silent and waiting for him to point out the cruel truth.

"For the Empire, this asking for peace may be humiliating…but from an outsider's perspective, your thinking is beyond arrogant. There's a serious difference between how your country operates and the rest of the world."

In an attempt to keep my expression from stiffening too much, I adjusted my glasses. As I did so, I came up with a theory that we were in fact living in two different worlds.

"But these are our principles…?"

The now-evident misunderstanding wasn't something any Imperial citizen could digest. Totally opposed perspectives were colliding, producing friction. Our worlds were perceived through different lenses. The paradigms under which we operated weren't even in the same dimension.

The Empire thought of itself as the victim. The rest of the world, however, saw itself in the same light. From the Empire's perspective, this was wholly contradictory. *They* were the ones who started this war. It was the Entente Alliance, the François Republic, and the Commonwealth. I resented them.

Thus, I shouted back my retort.

"But, Colonel Calandro. You know as well as I do that the Empire did nothing more than defend itself in a war we never started."

This was how the Empire understood the war. My rage wasn't met with the same opinion. The Ildoan gave a deep nod before showing a wry smile as he took up his second cigar. His gestures showed that, from a diplomatic standpoint, although he understood my plea, he didn't agree.

"If you want to talk about what you *believe* is right, why not take a trip to the nearest university and discuss it with a professor?"

"…I see…"

His metaphor was painfully clear. In an instant, I realized the discussion on what was right and fair held no water when it came to negotiations.

I remember what I asked next. Tormented by the realization that my efforts were futile, I posed a question to the colonel.

"How would you resolve a fight between children?"

What was the price the Empire would have to pay for peace? I asked him this, and Colonel Calandro wearily took the role of substitute teacher to kindly teach me. Thinking back on it, I'm sure it was awkward for him…but I was in no place to worry about the details.

I was…desperate. I needed to find a way out of this war for the Empire. And I didn't want to throw away the idea of reconciliation. With these thoughts in my head, I waited earnestly as I implored Colonel Calandro for an answer. But, unfortunately for me, my counterpart was an honest man.

I can still remember what he said, even to this day.

"If we're going to be straight with each other, the Empire needs to give up on victory on both the diplomatic and war fronts for it to be a fair trade. Your enemies will need an abundantly just reason if they are going to throw down their weapons."

Fair and just.

Counselor Conrad referred to these two concepts as the cardinal

rules of diplomacy. Never before had raw logic felt so miserable. I felt dizzy, which made me bring my hands to my head as I forced myself to listen to his explanation. It almost sounded like a cruel joke.

"The Empire is going to have to compensate its enemies. It's hard for me to say this…but I believe some land will have to be given up as well."

"Do you mean an exchange of land and international demilitarization?"

"…It will be a unilateral exchange. I believe only the Empire will be required to make these concessions."

I asked the question as a probing shot, but was met with overwhelming return fire. There was no room for compromise at this point.

"You're saying we'll have to not only pay reparations but give our enemies land even though we didn't lose the war? Does that not stray a bit from the concept of a *fair* trade? Is this what you consider fair in the Kingdom of Ildoa?"

"Of course, as your ally, we'll do everything in our power to negotiate better terms for the Empire."

He flashed me a smile.

Right, that was the instant I'd mostly given up.

I knew it was an empty promise. Though, I suppose we were the ones who brought an empty offer of no value. I realized there was no hidden key in the Empire's coffers that could open the door to peace.

It made me shake. I was disgusted by it all.

"I'm sorry… Give me a moment to think."

I said this before allowing myself to pour a glass of water this time, which I promptly drained completely. I was at my wit's end. It was almost strange how thirsty I was.

I was the type of soldier who used to hold diplomats in contempt for failing to do their jobs. I understand now that I was terribly mistaken. I imagine the majority of them were also patriots who dutifully did their best despite knowing their efforts would never bear fruit.

They were the same as us.

All that work we'd put into this, and there was no guarantee we would like the results. To avoid collapse, we sought tactical victory after tactical victory, which amounted to nothing more than

delaying the strategic defeat that awaited us.

For most people who found themselves on the battlefield, this meant losing their lives. The youth shouldered the future of the fatherland. They were the only hope for any light to shine on our nation. Despite everything at stake, so much depended on us maintaining the status quo.

It was then I decided to place my bet on a single possibility. I figured that as we were all soldiers, surely we shared the same perspective.

"…Is it impossible for two warring countries to unite, even in the name of peace?"

I was a novice diplomat, and this was my plea to meet halfway with my enemies.

I could never say such a thing now. As sad as it may be, such sentiment holds no value in the world of ruthless international geopolitics. It's an idea only the wildest of dreamers who are out of touch with reality would entertain.

And…my Ildoan friend, who was far more adept in politics than I was, responded to my question with sympathetic eyes.

"Colonel Lergen, you're an honest soldier. So…allow me to share my personal opinion with you."

"Your opinion means a lot to me."

His tone, eyes, and, most of all, sincerity—I could tell he was speaking from the heart. He wanted to be humane without overstepping an professional boundary.

Which was why I knew…what he said next would destroy any last hope I had in my search for peace.

"Understand that the Empire will need to make much more painful concessions…if they want these negotiations ever to happen. Your enemies are stubborn."

"You say that like the Empire will be the only one to make any concessions."

"No, not quite," the colonel said. I wonder if he was smiling out of kindness.

My sincere counterpart, seeing that he failed to convey his point in polite terms, was much more direct.

"They want to bring an end to the Empire. That is their honest wish."

I remember the anger that filled me.

"…So not only are the greatest concessions we can bear an

insult to them, but you think they want nothing more than for us to die on our knees, begging for our lives?"

Colonel Calandro immediately shook his head as if I were mistaken.

"I don't know if they'll take it that far. There's no need to be hasty."

I remember him trying to calm me down. But how could he be so calm? How could he say something so shocking so nonchalantly?!

"And for all intents and purposes, you'll treat the Empire as the loser of the war?"

There was only one answer to this question. Colonel Calandro feigned a level of reluctance. Though he couldn't outright reject the notion, it was all too clear, even to me.

"Ildoa is nothing more than a mediator. All I can say is…we can't mediate for the Empire if they aren't willing to accept the necessary concessions."

Everything began to come together in my mind. As each puzzle piece fell into place, a dramatic landscape made itself more and more apparent. And then I saw it. The puzzle was of a war we could not win. We weren't even fighting the war the right way.

The Empire didn't even realize this until a soldier met with a mediator. I know you could hardly call diplomacy a victory, but I still saw myself as an honorable warrior for the Empire.

The idea of defeat was confusing to me. In fact, I can't be sure I even accepted it when it first dawned on me. And our esteemed opponents had absolutely no intention of letting the Empire get away with any semblance of honor in this defeat. That was where their minds were while we were still dreaming of a way to end this. Was it not funny?

I was as arrogant an Imperial officer as they came. I was so obsessed…with abhorring anything dishonorable and carrying out my duty that I lost sight of reality. And oh, how painful reuniting with reality indeed was. In comparison, facing the miserable destiny of the fatherland almost seemed insignificant, or so I thought to myself as my vision blurred.

The next thing I knew, I was crossing the border on my way home via the international railway. A big thud of the train was what brought me out of my stupor. To me, the rattling of the train sounded more like the cracking of my nation's crumbling

foundation. I couldn't bring myself to deny this, or anything I'd been told that day, which made for a lonely ride.

Thinking back on it, being able to enjoy the wide variety of food available on the international railroad was a privilege in its own right, but…I couldn't stomach anything.

Looking out the window at the scenery of the fatherland was like staring into a hopeless abyss. As soon as I returned to the Empire, the conspicuous lack of lights cut into me like daggers. We were in the middle of a brownout due to electricity shortages.

The Empire used to be a bright fortress, glimmering with endless light. By the time I got off the train, I had accepted my failure.

I only question what I would've done next in the absence of my job—my duty. I'm fairly sure I would've found the nearest gun and bit down on the barrel.

But perhaps I was fortunate, in a way, to be wired like a staff officer. My internalized discipline drilled into me through years of intense work would kick in, and I would always find myself back at the General Staff Office. I know that makes it sound like my body moved on its own, but that is precisely how it was.

There are records of me giving my report. One of the other officers would later tell me that I looked like one of those windup dolls as I aimlessly walked through the halls of the General Staff Office, so I'm sure it's true that I handed in a report.

I just can't remember. The report said something to the effect of *Diplomacy is futile.*

Even now, I still cannot recall anything significant about the meeting where I said this. A friend once told me that our brains actively forget our most painful memories. Maybe I had put a stopper on my brain. All I know now is that day was a tipping point for me. I gave up all hope for the Empire finding peace through Ildoa.

The Empire had dreamed of ending the war as the victor.

I'm sure the readers today won't be able to understand or sympathize with this outlook. I felt the same way when I reread my records long after the war was over.

We were so greedy. And so naive.

It was why we couldn't hope for anything more back then.

I rejected it back in Ildoa, and as a result…I sowed the seeds that would grow into my notorious reputation throughout the

country. Later, I would reluctantly accept orders to participate in a certain military campaign—the spearhead thrust into Ildoa.

I would go from negotiator to invader.

Though, there is one thing I would like to clear up. I never spied on Ildoa while visiting them as a diplomatic envoy. I never negotiated peace in Ildoa with the intention of invading them. I swear on my honor that my only mission was to find a way out of the war for the Empire.

Though I knew conflict with Ildoa was in the cards, I wanted to do everything possible to avoid my nation's collapse up until the very end. I poured everything I had into my work. But sadly, it was all for naught.

With that being said…I accept that I was wrong—I have to. My only desire is to be sincere.

I was sure that there was another plan outside of diplomacy. I had seen enough evidence to know there was a plan for an offensive.

Though, I should probably rephrase this if I wish to remain honest. It's more like I knew that there *could* be an attack. I know that is a strange way to put it, but what I'm trying to say is that if my efforts failed, a part of me knew that something else would be set into motion.

Nobody said it out loud, but there was a feeling in the air. To make a long story short, there were signs I saw that gave me everything I needed to paint the entire picture.

Does this sound like I'm bragging? It wasn't anything impressive, trust me. I merely caught a glimpse at a coworker's papers I wasn't supposed to see. I had friends in the right places, allowing me to pick up on the scent. I believe anyone would've been able to figure it out if they were in my position. Of course, it goes without saying that the General Staff was incredibly strict with top-secret information at the time.

I'm sure the vast majority of my coworkers never dreamed the Empire would attack Ildoa. In fact, even the peace talks I conducted with them were a secret. This is why these efforts were less of a General Staff initiative…and more of a series of small plays made by people like General Rudersdorf, General Zettour, and me.

I think it would be beneficial for future generations if I left a description of our relationship at the time. This may get a bit off-topic, but please forgive me.

First, let's start with my rank.

As I hinted at while describing my efforts to find peace through Ildoa, I was in a bit of a strange position within the General Staff Office.

Officially, I was a senior officer for the Operations Department of the General Staff. As you may have inferred from my assignment to handle peace negotiations, I guess you could've called me a jack-of-all-trades of sorts.

I had access to top-secret information pertaining to not only the war, but all sorts of affairs that passed through the General Staff Office. I even had limited authority over Lieutenant Colonel Uger, who worked on maintaining the railway schedule and overseeing the army's mobilization. Though this authority was decorative in nature, it was a violation for even the Chief of the General Staff to give direct orders to my subordinates. Thinking back on it, the Empire's General Staff Office had morphed into something it had never originally intended to be.

The change, though, was necessary at the time. And urgently, at that.

It wasn't possible for us to pick up on anything out of the ordinary when we were too busy dealing with our impossible workloads. Though…I can't deny that we may have kept ourselves busy partially to escape from our reality.

Rather than be proud of my authority, I was more concerned with the condition of my stomach as I bore the never-ending stress and anxiety that my work gave me. Even now, whenever I get a stomachache, I still find myself recalling the bitter taste of K-Brot. Setting aside the pros and cons of the institutional blindfold than kept us naive, I can give you a simple explanation as to why our work environment wasn't sustainable: We would've died from being overworked. Even staff officers who had survived the harshest of battlefields would eventually meet with an honorable death under the crushing workload in the rear.

It all started with Deputy Director of the General Staff Zettour, who at the time oversaw what I call rear operations—managing provisions, logistics, the railway, and the like. He drew the ire of the committee of the Imperial Supreme High Command. (At the time, the Deputy Director was also in charge of running the war.)

His unique ability to observe and compare the conditions on the front lines and back home was likely made possible by his position.

But regardless of his position, the (at the time) general had the incredible insight to make a case for the Empire's dismal prospects for victory.

Just as history suggests, anyone with the title "the Great" added to their name tends to know the way.

Still, we also need to remember the story about Cassandra of Troy.

She was never praised for the true prophecies she shared with her people. Sadly, the inclination to shoot the messenger is universal. Man's desire to cover their ears at the mention of bad news is often a simple denial of reality. In this way, General Zettour was shunned for sharing an undesirable truth with the Empire.

As a result, he was sent to "inspect" the eastern front, which was essentially his dismissal. Many of my readers will know that this was when the general would later reemerge as a strategist. But at the time, he was the deputy director of the General Staff. Essentially, he was nothing more than a vital cog in the machine, but his very importance was what crushed the surrounding cogs.

But I digress. To get back on topic, at some point my subordinate Lieutenant Colonel Uger and I accidentally stumbled upon a planned offensive on Ildoa.

I've had people ask me why I didn't stop the attack. Unfortunately, that wasn't possible.

Lieutenant Colonel Uger and I had been sharing information in secret, and he approached me when the gears had already been set into motion. He came to my office that day by setting up an urgent meeting under a different name with a look of despair marring his face.

"Colonel, I've done everything I could to delay this, but we don't have much more time. In fact, we're moments away from deploying."

Deploying? To Ildoa? We were already surrounded on four different fronts, and we were going to add another? I think most sane soldiers would throw down their weapons right then and there.

And yet, the Imperial Army General Staff—the holy temple of military logic—was willing to go against the principles of war to seize the initiative. I bet our ancestors were rolling in their graves.

Lieutenant Colonel Uger sat with me as we quietly smoked our cigars, looking at the calendar. Considering the time of year and the

weather, we knew we didn't have much time.

"How are the reconciliations coming…?"

"We can't agree on fair terms."

"Fair terms…?"

Lieutenant Colonel Uger looked puzzled, so I told him the truth.

"They want us to surrender."

"Pardon me, but…isn't that what we are trying to do?"

Theoretically, yes. Unfortunately, this was the same question I had when I spoke with Colonel Calandro.

"Isn't that why you brought your proposal with all those concessions?"

I want you to try and imagine what I thought when I heard Lieutenant Colonel Uger ask me this. I didn't know if I should laugh and agree with him, or shake my head and cry. All I could do was chuckle bitterly to myself. I wanted to apologize to Lieutenant Colonel Uger, whose expression darkened as he watched me in confusion.

Though I hesitated about whether or not I should tell him the truth, the remnants of my long-broken conscience told me it was the right thing to do. Why? Because Lieutenant Colonel Uger was a person, too. He deserved to know. Something told me that he was different. He wasn't the same as me. I'm sure there was a vast gulf between an officer who retained his humanity and a General Staff officer who had become a cog in the war machine. Nevertheless, my duty dictated that I should tell him the truth.

"Colonel, before I give you the unfortunate news…I'd like for you to take a seat. I need you to relax and settle in."

I was trying to prep him for the bad news. Lieutenant Colonel Uger picked up on this, and followed my request by lowering himself into his chair before taking a deep breath. I then found the best cigars I could, and we smoked them before I shared the results of my meeting in Ildoa with my respectable friend Colonel Calandro.

I did my best to keep my emotions under control as I spoke.

"Colonel Uger, what we think are concessions…apparently come off as demands to the enemy. They even see them as an insult."

"What…?"

"They want the Empire, the Reich, to fall. They have no intention of settling the war with negotiations. What they want is

for us to simply get on our hands and knees, and beg for forgiveness."

I remember the utter shock on his face once he heard this, even today, all these years after the war. How could I forget? It was a beautifully dark blend of despair, resignation, and anger. I'm sure the face he made when he became aware of the Reich's fate was the same face I made during my meeting with Colonel Calandro.

The two of us, alone together, shared in that sense of overwhelming despair. I remember almost giving up on everything in that moment…

I don't know what to say about what happened from there. A lot remains to be said, but I can't find the words to explain it. There are also a great many things that should never be said again. I wonder how historians will judge us. That's not something this old man will ever know. I'm just what's left of my many outstanding peers and comrades in arms.

I'm sure my day of judgment will come eventually.

From the unpublished memoirs of Lergen.

[chapter]

III

The Incident

I don't know. There are many mysteries surrounding the October incident.

Some say that General Zettour was behind it, but there is also strong evidence it was a secret operation run by Commonwealth Intelligence. Since the accounts left by the persons involved are all over the place, there's no way for me to know which, if any, are true.

Andrew, a journalist

[chapter] III The Incident

SEPTEMBER 26, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, THE IMPERIAL GENERAL STAFF OFFICE

Bad news never arrives alone. When one rears its ugly face, there's always more to follow. The worst part is that often no one realizes something is bad news until much, much later.

The military command for the Empire had reached a point where their brains were no longer functioning properly. From the west, the airwaves carried a terrible report that would sap the color from every commander's face.

At first, they thought it was good news…

The report stated that the Imperial submarine fleet, under the orders to sink any and all vessels that entered its territory, had sunk an unknown enemy ship that displaced over ten thousand tons off the western coast.

A triumphant naval official brought the report. To their surprise, the army officials would go to bed commending the navy's prowess that night.

The following morning, however, they would be greeted by a distraught naval official carrying a ticking political time bomb into the General Staff Office. As luck would have it, there was a good chance that the sunken ship belonged to a neutral nation.

What's more, it was likely to have been a ship from the increasingly not-so-neutral Unified States: ample cause for the official's distress permeating throughout the General Staff Office. *We've gone and done it now*, they collectively thought.

The Unified States all but ignored the restricted submarine zone

created by the Empire. Not only had they brazenly sent a cargo ship right through the blockade, but it was also accompanied by a passenger ship, as if it was a matter of national pride. As of late, the Unified States had been sending war materiel on their merchant ships to the Commonwealth with their flag lit up at night.

Despite all this, they had the gall to tout *neutrality* in the public sphere. They even maintained an embassy within the Empire. Therefore, it was a diplomatic problem if they attacked them.

It would be more than enough of a reason for the nation to join the war on the opposing side. Having said that, if they let them through the blockade, there was no point in having one.

It was only natural for the officers to realize that they'd screwed up.

The officers were practically moaning as they immediately alerted their superiors and the Foreign Office to the predicament while simultaneously confirming the details of the encounter. In the course of doing so, however, they would uncover multiple other issues.

It was a huge problem that…they had sunken a ship. What was far worse, however, was everything surrounding the attack. The series of events that led up to this political mess were surprisingly straightforward.

In fact, it was a flawless attack. There wasn't a single mistake to be found in the captain's report or the records on the submarine. The target had fulfilled every condition to qualify for attack according to Imperial Navy protocol.

It started when the enemy approached. The Imperial fleet had picked up a high-speed vessel moving through its restricted area with its lights turned off. Both the captain and the officers on duty confirmed that there were no Empire-approved markings on the ship that suggested it was a vessel for repatriating citizens or transporting the sick.

On top of this, the ship was moving quickly at twenty knots, and with several more signals from what seemed to be escorting destroyers, the vessel was suspected of containing crucial shipments of arms and supplies. By the time the Imperial Navy submarine made contact with the ship, it was in the perfect position for an attack.

Taking into consideration the ship's speed and what they thought were destroyers flanking it, the captain decided to take his

chances and incapacitate it in one attack. He fired every torpedo he had—a huge risk, considering all the escorts. But the torpedoes struck home.

The moment they reached their target, the veteran captain saw a ball of fire, unlike anything he'd ever seen, well up in the distance. It was more than enough to convince any naval officer they'd sunk their target. An exemplary attack, sinking an important enemy ship fully laden with arms. In the after-action reports, it was even confirmed that the explosion could be heard throughout the entire submarine.

Even the officers who did everything by the book couldn't find any issue with the records. Either way, with this being the first time in a long while that a submarine had sunk such an obviously vital ship, it was only natural for all of the admiralty to cheer when they received word. The life of a submariner is spent in a small world. No one needed to check to understand the personality of the captain who had sunk the ship. He was a veteran among veterans who would turn in a modest report, void of any exaggeration, sharing only the details he personally confirmed.

This much they could tell from the report, with all details being disclaimed as estimates. Had it been a newer captain, the report would have sounded more like *We sunk an enemy ship!* Excited by his first victory after a long period of boredom, he would rouse his crew before sending some sailors to confirm the kill. Naturally, naval intelligence participated in the inspection as well.

Meanwhile, the Decryption Department for the Imperial Navy had intercepted some…ominous messages. Multiple analysts conferred and agreed that the code they'd been receiving nonstop since the attack included words that meant *civilian ship* and *Unified States*. When the decryption team handed their findings to the analysts, they would share a groan before reworking the inspection list. This was how the good news took a dark turn.

Whatever they thought at first, the sunken ship was a passenger-cargo ship of a neutral nation. Many of the passengers had likely died, which posed an obvious diplomatic problem of massive proportions—a problem that would be a source of stress for more than a couple departments.

With their stomachs already aching due to their meager rations, this extra stress almost made them want to cry out in pain. As they endured this fresh wave of agony to assess the situation, they soon

discovered that Unified States ships had started a policy of turning off their lights at night.

It was around this time that a naval officer appeared with a second report that would only exacerbate any ulcers: They had sunk another ship. All personnel involved in the submarine attacks were thrown into disarray. The news of the first attack was already enough to bring the department to its knees, and the second political firebomb truly tested the limits of their mental fortitude.

Of course, they had brought this upon themselves. Sinking ships uninvolved in the war was just one of the risks of raiding the merchant navy. Nevertheless, the attack couldn't have come at a worse time. Their headaches were only growing more numerous and more painful.

There seemed to be no salvation for them. Had God forsaken them? Or was this the devil's doing? It didn't matter; the naval officers cursed both heaven and hell, and the General Staff officer who received the report would soon be doing the same.

"They've sunk a Unified States passenger-cargo ship. Two of them! As if one wasn't enough, they sunk a second the next morning!"

An irritated General Rudersdorf slammed his fists against his desk, which made the navy cadet who brought him the report look like he was about to swoon.

The Empire was sinking any ships that passed through its no-sailing zone. No amount of caution would've stopped them from eventually sinking a Unified States ship.

It was precarious enough when Unified States citizens died when they were passengers on foreign vessels, but…for the Empire to sink a Unified ship and cause the death of countless civilians?

Lieutenant Colonel Uger, who was standing in Rudersdorf's adjutant's stead, voiced the general's concerns.

"I'm sure the people of the Unified States will be up in arms about this."

"It's far worse than that," Rudersdorf said as he shook his head.

"There's more bad news coming from Counselor Conrad's end."

"From the Foreign Office? Are our enemies making a diplomatic move?"

Not quite following his superior, Lieutenant Colonel Uger would soon learn that there are some things you can never predict.

"No, it isn't about our enemies."

“What?”

“This is still a secret, but our Foreign Office is wary that the Unified States may join the war, and has sent a telegram to one of our embassies in the New World outlining a contingency plan.”

It was an ally who was finally making their move. However, upon hearing this, Lieutenant Colonel Uger failed to immediately understand the problem.

“…I’m sorry, sir, but is this not sensible on their part? It sounds to me like we should be happy the Foreign Office is finally trying to do their job.”

“Colonel Uger, you’re so naive.”

General Rudersdorf sounded a bit envious as he let his soldiers fall and grumbled at his subordinate. Had it not been work hours, he probably would’ve taken the bottle of whiskey out of his desk and helped himself to a glass. Instead, he took out a report he’d received just moments earlier.

“Read this.”

With a blank look on his face, Lieutenant Colonel Uger took the documents and began flipping through them. The color drained from his face as he made his way through the report.

“This is summarizing a plan to encircle the Unified States…? Drafted by…the Foreign Office?! W-wait, you mean to tell me they *telegraphed* this?!”

The first thing that caught him off guard was the sheer carelessness. A telegraphed correspondence could easily be intercepted. For an important matter like this, they should have used a trusted officer to hand-deliver it. Even considering the distance, nothing more than the objective should be sent over telegraph. The finer details should’ve been left to be communicated in person.

Why on earth would they ever telegraph anything that laid everything out? Uger couldn’t wrap his mind around how out of touch the diplomats were.

“Did Counselor Conrad do anything about this? Certainly he recognized that this was a problem. I can’t imagine he’d let a mistake as egregious as this slip by him.”

“Evidently, he did pick up on this and tried to stop it.”

There was chagrin in his voice. General Rudersdorf shared his disdain for his country’s diplomats with a sigh.

“…This was an official Foreign Office decision. The counselor is

but a lone diplomat, and it appears that most of his peers have failed to keep up with the times."

He'd warned them. Lectured them. Held their hands through everything they needed to know.

And still, this is what happened.

The despair born from his futile efforts visibly weighed down on his shoulders. Did the Empire really need to depend on this kind of organization to find a diplomatic solution? Was it their only choice?

Knowing there was nothing he could do on this front, Rudersdorf felt a sense of despair welling up inside of him. This wasn't the first time he felt this despair. It was a daily sensation in the imperial capital, and it was also the nature of the work he had shoved onto Zettour. Just a glimpse of what that man had to regularly deal with was enough for him to realize how incredible his friend was, and why he was trying to find a new job for him.

Unaware of General Rudersdorf's innermost thoughts, Lieutenant Colonel Uger was more concerned with the nonsensical actions taken by the Imperial Foreign Office.

"So what do we do if the enemy deciphers our message…?"

General Rudersdorf was worried about the same exact thing. Their ciphers were all they could rely on, but Lieutenant General Romel was insistent on how unreliable they could be. Of course, there was still no guarantee that he was right. It was military policy to hand-deliver important messages as important as this, but that wasn't always practical during times of war. That said, not all hope was lost.

General Rudersdorf would point out his last thread of hope with a wry chuckle.

"The army and the Foreign Office use different ciphers, Lieutenant Colonel."

"Telecommunications may not be my specialty, but that hardly sounds reassuring."

He was right. It was merely something to be hopeful about. Rudersdorf recognized this as soon as he uttered it.

He surely didn't believe that the ciphers used by the Foreign Office were superior to that of the army, but on the off chance they were, he would be the first one to storm the Foreign Office and demand they let the army use them.

"I know the army shouldn't have to worry about diplomacy, but

I wonder if the Foreign Office realizes what they're doing. This could trigger a massive international incident."

"It is as you say. Our ciphers are not without their flaws. There is a good chance that somebody has decrypted the message."

"I see," the former railway worker said. He never imagined he'd have to poke around in diplomatic affairs. He took the chance to share his thoughts on the Foreign Office's potentially leaked policies.

"We've basically handed the Unified States the propaganda they need to join the war on a silver platter. It definitely doesn't help that we've already sunk two of their ships… It makes me want to ask those in charge at the Foreign Office what they think they're doing."

The tired general shook his head.

"Sinking their ships will be more than enough to seal the deal for the Unified States. Anything the Foreign Office does is just a little extra sugar on top for them."

The ships sent by the Unified States were bringing supplies to the Commonwealth under the flag of neutrality. As if this wasn't an issue in itself, the fact that there were civilians on the ship meant that sinking them would cast the Empire in the most villainous of lights.

There was only one solution.

They would need to implement a stricter border inspection policy. The Empire needed to make sure that everything that happened on its borders was completely legal and aboveboard. Though…the navy's strategy to interdict commercial shipping hinged on submarine warfare. Without a presence above the water, they couldn't conduct any real inspections.

"I suppose our current strategy of raiding enemy shipping comes with too much risk."

As Lieutenant Colonel Uger said this, he showed a bit of a perplexed expression.

"What's with that look, Colonel? Do you have something else you want to say?"

"Yes," the lieutenant colonel said with a resolute look. "What if we halted all submarine attacks on merchant vessels?"

It was a bold opinion. Though, it would be laughed off outright by General Rudersdorf.

"You think we should stop our raids entirely? Preposterous."

“I just don’t see how we can realistically prevent this from happening again. There will always be Unified States ships in the mix. I suggest reconsidering our current strategy.”

“What if that’s exactly what the enemy wants us to do? The difference between our recovery speeds is already far too great. If we allow them to move their resources at will, what do you think will happen? The answer should be obvious. Ending our raids would only empower our enemies in the west.”

The Commonwealth was a maritime superpower. The Empire needed to frustrate their shipping to keep them from bringing their true power to bear.

“Logistics is my area of expertise.”

Lieutenant Colonel Uger knew the importance of good distribution channels. Despite this, he couldn’t ignore his anxiety about what he felt was to come.

“Our raids no longer pose much of a threat where it matters. Most of their resources travel in convoys that we can’t touch.”

“Go on.”

“I think we should reevaluate whether the returns of our strategy justify the costs.” Lieutenant Colonel Uger offered his opinion as a logistics expert. General Rudersdorf would show that he realized that in this regard, he was nothing more than a skilled amateur.

He quietly nodded before mumbling.

“The situation is still developing. I should probably talk to Zettour about this…”

SEPTEMBER 28, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, THE INTELLIGENCE HQ FOR THE COMMONWEALTH

Working as a Commonwealth Intelligence agent presented a perfect opportunity to appreciate the nation’s proud traditions, starting with the language. General Habergram, the beloved leader of this fine institution, made sure that every agent was blessed with the opportunity to bask in the nasty sort of irony he so enjoyed using. The polite gentlemen who made up his staff would respond to his venom with their own Albion chap parlance while observing every

bit of decorum. Those unfamiliar with this ecosystem and who thought of the agents as a crude bunch were either inexperienced, irremediable dullards, or simple sourpusses.

Reality was always bitter. Though they appeared to be a happy-go-lucky bunch, the intelligence community always wore a scowl on the inside, clenching their fists as they clenched their lips around their tobacco. The laughs were necessary; they kept their hearts from being crushed by the harshness of reality. Alcohol was what kept them going, but without the laughs to sober them up, their precious intelligence would surely wither away.

This delicate balance was necessary for them to continue facing their unpleasant reality. The Commonwealth Intelligence HQ staff marched into work with the same stiff smiles they plastered on their faces day after day.

Under the same cloudy skies, they greeted the usual mage standing watch. The more perceptive of the lot would quickly realize that the security was studying them much closer that day. Was it something to do with the war? Or perhaps a sudden change in events?

Those who picked up on this slight difference would question it as they walked through the halls of the building…before being caught off guard by what they saw next. The group of calm, cool, and collected gentlemen would trip over themselves—that is, if they could even believe what they saw with their own two eyes.

For strutting down the hallway, with a skip in his step and a smile on his face, Mr. John could be seen excitedly fixing his tie as he approached the general's door. He gave an affectionate glance at the folder he held before knocking firmly on the door. He even let himself in!

This was the intelligence agency. Classified information was meant to be kept secret, and yet there was nothing inconspicuous about the sight they'd all witnessed. Everybody knew what this meant.

That said, from Mr. John's perspective, he felt their reactions were justified. After all, his presence there meant reassuring news had arrived.

Mr. John entered the office and, with his baritone voice, shared the good word with his boss.

"General, I have two instances of interesting news."

"Oh? Two, you say?"

General Habergram smiled broadly at the pleasant, unexpected visit as Mr. John—also smiling—began to share his news. Good news always came with easy work.

"The first is from an old friend of ours."

"Have the nitwits in the Empire given us another gift?"

They both smiled.

Mr. John delved into the contents of the gift.

"But of course. We intercepted a message intended for an Imperial embassy. My people finally managed to decipher it. Take a look for yourself. I think you'll find it to be both fascinating and stimulating."

Holding out his magic intel, Mr. John couldn't help but chuckle at the utterly shocking discovery.

"This is almost hard to believe. I should probably apologize for looking down on the Imperial Foreign Office all these years. I always knew they lacked discretion…but to think they could be this bad makes me feel like they are a bunch of comedic geniuses."

"Cut to the chase."

"The enemy diplomatic corps has made a grave error. They're panicking—they're falling apart."

It was fine for the diplomats to create a contingency plan in case the Unified States joined the war…but to actively broadcast the details of their subversive plan over the airwaves certainly wasn't a wise move. The message wasn't something that could be overlooked. As General Habergram made his way down the page, he slowly matched Mr. John's smile.

"So not only did they sink a civilian ship, but instead of apologizing, the Empire is planning their defense?"

"I feel sorry for a country that doesn't know how to conduct proper diplomacy. But I never expected them to use the embassy of all places in their little conspiracy! They telegraphed absolutely everything! Did they think the rest of the world wasn't listening?! Those imbeciles."

Their plans were now out in the open, and just as one would expect from an Empire office, there was even a detailed plan outlined within their message. It included a bulleted list of things that needed to be done in case of the outbreak of war. Hell, the Commonwealth couldn't replicate this level of idiocy if they tried. With a broad grin, Mr. John continued his cutting assessment.

"The sinister plan those evil Imperialists are scheming up

should be clear as day. I doubt our gents could come close to fabricating a telegraph this perfect for creating anti-Imperial sentiment in neutral countries even if we wanted to."

Mr. John could only laugh. His boss, on the other hand, was not without his suspicions.

"This is indeed the best gift we could ask for, assuming it's real."

When things seemed too good to be true, they often were. General Habergram would make his suspicions clear to Mr. John.

"What if this is a trap?"

"What kind of trap could it be?"

"They could try to pin this on us and say it's a fake. Or perhaps they're testing our ability to decipher their telegraphs? What are the chances the Imperial Foreign Office isn't as stupid as we think they are?"

An irritated Habergram tapped his finger on his desk as he asked these questions. He spoke from a place of grand conspiracy. This was a healthy way to view the world for an intelligence agent at war.

Mr. John would share his expertise on the subject.

"While I can't be sure for myself, the information in that folder has been collected from multiple departments, including Mr. Kim's and Mr. Jackson's. Just read the additional notes attached in the file."

"I thought you would explain it to me."

"Unfortunately, there are too many raw details derived from primary sources for even me to read it. It's above my jurisdiction."

Sometimes in intelligence agencies, there were internal barriers set in place. Though this could be inconvenient at times, it was commonplace for a messenger to carry files they knew nothing about.

Curiosity kills the cat, after all. No matter how much said cat was adored within the Intelligence HQ. Any satirist or intelligence agent bold enough to take a peek for themselves would become very familiar with a dose of poison or a knife in the back before long. Which was exactly why Mr. John properly looked away as his favorite boss used a letter opener to unseal the documents. As ridiculous as this may have seemed, the rules were the rules. Being the veteran he was, Mr. John made sure to obey them to the letter. However, this firm discipline of his ever so slightly wavered when

his boss began clapping his hands as he burst out laughing at the report.

"Ha-ha, HA-HA-HA-HA! This is rich! Superb!"

His boss, who spent his days with a seemingly permanent scowl on his face, cried out in joy. So much so that it made Mr. Johnson question whether or not he should call a doctor.

"Mr. Johnson, you need to read this."

With a bit of chagrin, Mr. John took the document from his boss and scanned through it. The thin paper was a list. It was an order for an array of different items. This alone was nothing special. But the fact that it was an order telegraphed by the Imperial Foreign Office? This painted an entirely different picture for any specialist who read it.

"Is this an order placed by the Imperial diplomats? As far as I can tell, it seems they're finally about to try their hand at espionage. Do they intend on having their agents double as case officers? I'd certainly advise against that. I must ask…how did we get this information?"

"Their embassy is a loyal customer of our close friends. We sell them mundane products at compellingly low prices, which we make up for by gathering information here and there."

Hearing that the Commonwealth had surrounded the Imperial Embassy with fake businesses was enough for Mr. John to infer the rest. The Commonwealth Intelligence Agency likely supplied the embassy with all its daily necessities at prices that couldn't be ignored. This wasn't a particularly clever trick during a war. It was a part of the order of operations for an organization that ran on gathering enemy information. That said, the list itself also wasn't something that could be passed around the embassy; it was far too top secret. Thus, one had to question the legitimacy of these movements.

"The diplomats are rushing to buy all these items to prepare for something because they were ordered to. While I can't deny the chance they may be aware of our espionage, these are diplomats we're dealing with, not career spies. They don't even know the difference between agents and case officers, so it's quick work for us."

"So you believe they are simply following orders."

"Yes, I do. Now, there's something else we need to talk about. You know too much."

For the Commonwealth Intelligence Agency, Mr. Johnson was an ace who *could* act as both an agent and a case officer, and the knowledge he had crammed into his mind was far too valuable. It would be a problem if the Empire ever got their hands on him. This is when Mr. John realized that there was a reason he had been shown the top-secret document, and he was about to find out. It seemed like it would be difficult for him to leave the office moving forward…

"Are you finally going to give me a desk?"

"That's right."

Were they going to make him a case officer?

Oh. Mr. John showed a bright expression, but unfortunately for him, the God of Labor would continue to ignore his daily prayers.

"I want you to work with one of our colonies. I need you to ramp up the anti-Imperial sentiment in the neutral countries abroad."

"I believe…a diplomat would be more suited for such a position."

"Exactly."

With a smile, General Habergram patted Mr. John on the back and gave him a little reminder about where he worked.

"What were our official titles again?"

"You know, I'm not enjoying getting older. I can hardly recall anything anymore. Let me think…I believe we are intelligence agents for His Royal Majesty."

This quick-witted senior attempted to show his opposition, but any hope of getting out of his transfer was nothing more than a pipe dream, and real life wasn't as kind as dreams.

"Mr. Johnson, you're not that old yet."

His boss flat out rejected his half joke with a sharp look, and a reluctant Mr. John was forced to face reality… The Commonwealth Intelligence Agency operated as a wing of the Foreign Office. In other words, Mr. John and his boss were both civil servants charged with handling their nation's foreign policy.

"We've received word from HQ that Ildoa and the Unified States are both moving toward an armed neutral alliance…"

General Habergram made his firm intent even more clear by referring to the headquarters of the Foreign Office as HQ, as if he really worked there. Left without a choice in the matter, Mr. John could only raise his white flag with dignity.

“I’ll go and inspect the situation.”

“Excellent! That gets that out of the way. It was nice to receive some good news for once. I believe you said you have one more interesting bit of news to report on?”

His boss, who was as happy as could be, would never expect the news that was saved for second. Mr. John was purposefully vague as he unveiled what would be the actual catch of the day.

“Take a look at this. It seems the enemy deputy director plans on visiting the eastern front on the second of October. He’ll be there for three days. We have a detailed itinerary of his flights as well.”

His report was met with an immediate response.

“Let me see it.”

The curious sparkle in his eyes communicated his unspoken question: *Can we do it?*

Naturally, this question was a matter of catching his prey—a question he didn’t need to ask. Their Operations Department was working out things on their end, and they’d already come up with an initial outline for their plan.

“We deciphered this information three hours ago. The staff are already working on a plan of attack. Although it pulls from tactics used in past contingency plans, I believe it should be up to snuff. We also have the analysts verifying the info and calculating our chances of success.”

The organization was made up of people who knew what they needed to do. They didn’t wait for orders and got straight to work with a full understanding of their duties. Each and every member was efficient. The Commonwealth’s far reach was actually a tight-knit network of singular units working seamlessly in unison.

“Good. Give the gents my thanks.”

The look of satisfaction about General Habergram would soon fade as he asked his next question.

“And? Is this assassination truly a good thing?”

Mr. John felt like he could physically hear his boss’s sharp stare cutting the air as he summed him up with his gaze. Were he a younger agent, this probably would’ve been cause for a chill or two to run down his spine, but Mr. John was able to give his opinion without hesitation.

“This is my personal opinion…but I believe it may be worth the risk.”

“And why’s that?”

“We have info on the plane, its route, and even the team that will be pulling guard duty. It isn’t often we can get intel this precise. The biggest risk lies in the fact that they plan on having the Devil of the Rhine fly with him as a part of his escort.”

“Not her again.”

Yes, her. Mr. John painfully agreed with his boss’s sentiment. The security detail was not to be taken lightly if she was going to be there.

The Devil of the Rhine. She was the Named they feared the most—a true devil who devoured the François Republic on the Rhine front, tormented the Federation in the east, and made quick work of even their own nation’s marine mages. With her at his side, General Rudersdorf could move with impunity on the eastern front. He was using their nation’s best hunting hound as a powerful guard dog. As extravagant as that seemed, she was undeniably one of the best escorts. As the Devil would make short work of any typical encounter, approaching carelessly was out of the question. Most fleets would be sent to the bottom of the ocean if they stumbled into her by accident.

“I can’t deny that her presence is the biggest risk and obstacle involved with any proposed assassination.”

“The Empire has been at war long enough to know when and where they need to protect their important personnel… I suppose they perform enough decapitation strikes to know how to defend against them.”

The two men cleared their minds to focus on the sole threat that could foil their assassination attempts: the Devil of the Rhine. Knowing that they would discuss this topic, Mr. John had come prepared with a plan of his own.

“If we’re going to take out the Devil of the Rhine, we’d need an entire brigade of prewar elites to even have a chance. I don’t have the heart to send newer recruits up against such a monster. Of course, if our target is a plane, then it’s a different story.”

“Are you suggesting we down their plane and take out the target that way?”

Mr. John smiled and nodded at his boss‘s question.

“It may be more realistic to simply ignore their escorts by sending in our own mixed assault team of aircraft and aerial mages.

The Devil of the Rhine was the leader of the Empire’s most elite task force. Numbers didn’t mean much against those dogs of war,

who mauled their way through any amount of soldiers thrown at them. Nevertheless, these elites were also at the mercy of physics. Even if defeating them wasn't a realistic option, their package was a different story. There were many myths about heroes outwitting powerful beasts of legend, and there certainly wasn't any point in trying to out-monster these monsters.

"If it is a battle of wits, the odds should be in our favor. That's a fact," he concluded.

It was never good for an honest intelligence agent to mistake their hopes for fact. The same went for self-flattery. Whether he was conscious of this or not, selectively reporting the data his boss wanted to hear would only lead to unrealistic expectations. This was why Mr. John always tried to stick to the middle of the road like the excellent agent he was.

"The fact of the matter is, the general is going all out for his guard detail. My own instincts tell me that this is the real deal. That said, I can't deny that I may just be excited about what a big catch this would be."

"I agree with you regarding that last point."

General Habergram flashed a grin before shaking his head and crossing his arms. He remained silent as he wrapped his lips around a cigar before lighting it, almost like he wanted to hide his grin.

Mr. John took this as a hint to join his superior for a smoke. He lit some soldier's tobacco. As an agent working out in the field, it was important that he wasn't picky.

He let out a few puffs of smoke before his superior caved and offered him one of his cigars, which he graciously accepted.

It had a mellow taste to it. It made him jealous. It was hard to come upon goods as fine as this with the Imperial submarines hounding shipping.

"May I bother you for a second cigar?"

Mr. John wanted to enjoy this rare chance for a proper smoke, but sadly, his superior shook his head to signify their little break was over.

"Mr. Johnson, let's try to stay on topic."

Being one of His Majesty's most excellent agents, Mr. John was complicit. Though, he did take the opportunity to pick a few cigars out of the box for later, drawing a stern scowl from his boss.

"I quite like the plan the gents have come up with for this one, but we need a guarantee that it will work."

“What we have is strong evidence.”

Continue, his boss said with his eyes as Mr. John laid out the basis for his claim.

“We intercepted a message from the Empire’s eastern headquarters…and it seems like General Zettour is set to be away from the front lines the day of the visit.”

“I bet those two dastardly villains are up to something.”

General Habergram’s concise evaluation was on the mark. This would be a rendezvous between two of the Empire’s most troublesome commanders. The two monsters of the Imperial General Staff were planning to meet in secret. Just thinking about this was enough to send chills down their spines. The two intelligence officers felt a trace of bitterness in the air mix with the lingering scent of their cigars. Talking about it made General Habergram’s caution grow even more.

“That Zettour. Just look at all the games he’s playing in the east with the Federation. What makes you think we could ever trust a message that involves him?”

This was a genuinely legitimate concern. The telegraph could very easily be a message meant to lure in whoever was listening. General Zettour had shown time and time again that he was the master of deception. The Commonwealth Intelligence Agency knew this better than anyone else. Despite being an Imperial soldier, Zettour played the game just as well as any Commonwealth agent.

“As you say, it’s a complicated piece of information to handle.”

“I’m beginning to get fed up with all of this. All these damned staff generals… They’re in a league of their own.”

“Yes, they are. I never expected the Empire, a country of narrow-minded specialists, to ever figure out the rules of the game…”

Though the two agreed on Zettour’s prowess, they also knew how to deal with his kind. The more formidable the enemy, the more beneficial it is to eliminate them. This was especially true during wartime. Removal was always an option, but when it came to hunting, targets had to be picked carefully. Bagging the wrong game could have an unintended impact on the ecosystem. The same went for assassinations. As these two men were familiar with aristocratic hunting practices, General Habergram decided to change the topic to what would happen after they killed their target.

“Have our analysts make a list of Imperial officers who could take Rudersdorf’s place or may potentially pose even more of a threat?”

“Perhaps you should look no further than General Zettour? I wouldn’t want to deal with the Imperial Army with him at the top.”

Hearing this remark, General Habergram responded to his agent with utmost confidence.

“I doubt he’ll be in a position to do anything. Without General Rudersdorf propping him up from his place in the General Staff, General Zettour has no other backers in the upper echelons of the Empire.”

The Commonwealth Intelligence agency knew this. The higher-ups in the Imperial government harbored an extreme dislike for General Zettour. A quick walk in the streets of the Empire was enough to confirm this. It wasn’t uncommon to hear members of the Supreme High Command talking openly about how he was one of their worst generals. Though it was impossible to know what the key figures of the army thought…there had to be some truth to the rumors spreading throughout Imperial high society. Through their steady accumulation of human intelligence gathered through Ildoa, they even knew the details of why he was sent away to the east, details General Habergram was fully aware of.

“According to our source in the imperial capital, word is that Zettour was shipped off to the east as an inspection officer.”

He was the Empire’s Cassandra, prophesizing the bad news they didn’t wish to hear. The fact that an officer as capable as him was chased out of central command was good news for the Commonwealth. Mr. John agreed with what General Habergram said, for the most part. That said, he felt obligated to add a few more details as the agent working on this case.

“His transfer has caused our friend Drake quite a bit of trouble. And the Federation, too, I suppose.”

“They’re both young. We fossils need to give the young pups their share of trouble. Think of it as a form of kindness.”

“Ha-ha-ha.” The two men shared a devious laugh. These public servants loyal to their country’s political interests were the eyes and ears for His Royal Majesty.

Long live the king. They both grinned and finally turned their attention to their precious ally in the east with a shared distaste for Communism.

“It would certainly make things a bit easier for the Commies.”

“General Zettour has proven himself to be highly effective in the east. Don’t you think it would be a bit too optimistic to hope he’ll be replaced on the front lines?”

“That’s true,” General Habergram said as he chuckled wryly to himself, glancing at the file in his hand. Setting aside General Zettour for the moment, he turned his attention to the picture of a rugged man on the top of the page. General Rudersdorf, their would-be target, was a boulder of a man, but more frightening than his face was his brain. Just how many thousands of lives would be saved if they managed to put a bullet in that brain? Honestly, the General couldn’t care less about the Federation. But his own nation’s youth were the Commonwealth’s future, and what better reason was there for the gentlemen to get their hands dirty than save as many of them as they could?

He’d come to his conclusion.

“I want you to keep in mind the possibility of Zettour using all of this to propel himself to the top.”

“Of course.”

General Habergram crossed his legs and pondered as he watched his subordinate leave his office.

“The question is, will this operation be good for the Empire or us? I can only hope…that the scale doesn’t tip in their favor.”

He prayed, as if appealing to an unseen guardian angel watching over him.

The pride of the Commonwealth Intelligence Agency—its expert analysts—would be on the receiving end of the orders for a new analysis. The analyst would wash down their complaints with who knew how many cups of tea as they shouldered yet another impossible task. This department was supplied with as much tea as it needed to keep its agents caffeinated. The only thing they found as terrifying as the Imperial Army’s submarine blockade was the incarnation of evil known as the head of their department, the one who filled them with tea to get them through the impossible hours they were forced to work. With fire in their eyes, the gentlemen did as they always did and projected their disdain for their boss onto their nation’s enemies.

Of course, the analysts were still human. No matter how much intellect they had at their disposal, there wasn't much to analyze without proper intel…and none of them ever turned down an invite to the pub. A group of analysts made their way into the bar at the Intelligence Agency and began discussing their new task with some glasses of scotch in hand.

"The chances of General Zettour rising up the ranks from all this? I give it fifty-fifty at best. Though, I must admit that it's hard to confirm any intel on the man…"

"Even the best magician's act is nothing more than some party tricks, though."

The group nodded to each other quietly. How would he react to one of his best friends dying? No matter how capable General Zettour was, there wouldn't be much he could do in the immediate aftermath of such an unpredictable event. And even if he moved quickly, he would still suffer from the usual lag that came with the transfer of information. In other words, he wouldn't have time to act.

"Climbing up from the front lines after such a massive shuffle in the rear would be no small task."

However feared this man was as a monster among monsters, it didn't change the fact that he was but a single person in a large organization. The Commonwealth agents knew better than most just how irrational organizations could be. Being the realists they were, the agents understood how humans operated, which brought them all to the same question: How would the Empire's leaders receive General Zettour?

"Riddle me this: How do you suspect the great and wise general will dramatically force his way onto center stage despite being demoted to his current position?"

"Do you think the Empire's bigwigs would allow it?"

"That's right… General Zettour is hated in the imperial capital. Would they even consider him as a potential candidate in the first place?"

The agents were correct in evaluating this as a serious challenge. Their reasoning was based on repeated analysis of the situation in the Empire. This evaluation was thorough and the embodiment of good, common sense.

The Commonwealth Intelligence Agency had come to a very realistic conclusion. General Rudersdorf and General Zettour were

political allies, and even if they removed the former, they couldn't remove the possibility that the latter could respond with alacrity. However, this came with the proviso that General Zettour wouldn't have ground to stand on if the capital were to undergo an extreme change. This was something the intelligence officers were certain of. General Zettour was still just a man. Even for him, there was no escaping the chaos that would ensue after General Rudersdorf's sudden death. He certainly wouldn't be in a position to chase a promotion.

Their grand scheme took out two birds with one stone. It was the perfect plan in that regard. The analyst who delivered the report to General Habergram was astonished by the rhythmic knock he gave on his superior's office door.

I guess I'm in no place to judge Mr. Johnson, he thought to himself as he happily delivered that analysis to his boss. It was the report General Habergram had been waiting for. General Habergram had waited the entire night for his analysts to finish the report. He practically sat on the edge of his seat as he read through the papers. After he finished reviewing everything, he took a deep breath.

"…Are the preparations in place to make this look like an accident?"

The analyst answered confidently, with a clear voice.

"Our plan is perfect, sir. There just so happens to be plans for a long-distance bombing raid on Federation territory. If we put ourselves into the mix, we could easily make it look like a random encounter. We should be able to fool the enemy."

It only took a moment for the decision to be made.

"I'll get the prime minister's permission to move forward. Make sure preparations are made on our end as well, gentlemen."

OCTOBER 2, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, THE EASTERN FRONT ARMY HEADQUARTERS

I watch as two giants clash before my very eyes. They're the two Imperial Army General Staff officers: both highly respected specialists in their fields, both with ample accolades and authentic intellect and skills. These two men may very well have a page

dedicated to each of them in history books one day. It's hard to describe, however, the sight of the two grown men, both with resolution in their eyes, staring each other down like newly commissioned officers getting into a loud, heated argument.

"That is why we must act now!"

"It's out of the question. You need to look at the state of the war."

General Rudersdorf barks at General Zettour, who promptly denies him. Despite knowing how close these two are, I must say that I wish they would have a conversation where they are this frank with each other without me present.

We're currently at the Army Headquarters on the eastern front. The facility is heavily guarded, and though none of the guards were stationed near this room…there is no guarantee that someone passing by outside won't hear this intense argument. As such, I can feel a dull ache in my stomach. I look up to find General Rudersdorf shouting at General Zettour once again.

"We can't lose the initiative! The longer we remain idle, the worse our chances will be! We need to attack Ildoa by the spring, at the very latest. We should begin right now, if possible. It's the only way we'll be able to avoid total collapse!"

"We can't do it."

The debate over Plan B is really starting to heat up. With a grim look, General Zettour folds his arms, as if to show his iron will remains steadfast.

"Think of the war front. There is almost nothing to be gained from invading Ildoa. You want us to invade by spring? Cut the crap. It's good to be aware of environmental challenges, but the focus should be on politics, not the season."

Though the details surrounding the issue remain unsettled, they both know the Empire is on the verge of disaster. Both generals share a healthy awareness of the problems the Empire faces in the near future. And yet, it is almost impossible for even two sagacious friends to agree on this issue.

"This isn't something that can be undone, even if you can somehow unite the country on this issue. Our soldiers are what matter most."

"Exactly! I'm worried about the current trend we've been following. This is why we can't let this chance pass us by, even if our plan is rough around the edges! We don't have time to think up

a new one!! We need to do this; it's now or never."

"You shouldn't be so quick to gamble, Rudersdorf! Understand that it's your country and its soldiers you're trying to wager here!"

"…Has the eastern front made you soft, Zettour?! The Goddess of Fate will get away if you hesitate! We need to act now if we don't want all that we've sacrificed to be in vain!"

I can tell they're both probably speaking from the heart. Their brutally honest words capture the zeitgeist of these times. If I were a historian or a student from the future, I'm sure I would be frantically recording each and every word with tears in my eyes. However, as an Imperial soldier forced to be present, Tanya has little interest in these talks—it amounts to pearls cast before a swine. The current extreme working conditions only create insurmountable stress for me.

"I wonder if it's not you who's been away from the battlefield for too long?"

"Is that an insult?"

"Listen… Plans are nothing more than plans, but the war front is ever-changing. Is there any reason to insist on an old plan that no longer holds water?"

General Zettour continues with a tone of annoyance, which is met by General Rudersdorf's intense, unwavering stare. It's not quite the academic lashing I'd expect from a scholar such as the general…but his opponent also isn't the type to sit back and take it quietly.

"I see my decisions through until the end! There's nothing wrong with that!"

In response to General Rudersdorf, an uncharacteristically emotional General Zettour furiously shakes his head.

"We're no longer field officers… We need to think through our strategies carefully."

General Zettour's anger with his friend is sincere. He doesn't try to hide his frustration at the other general's apparent inability to understand the circumstances, but General Rudersdorf responds the same way. He barks back with all his might.

"We cannot be passive when it comes to the war front! Seizing the initiative to control the battlefield should always be our highest priority! Have you forgotten the basic art of war, Zettour?!"

Forced to listen to all this from the sidelines, the confrontation between her two superiors continues to cause Tanya quite the

stomachache. Likely due to the increasing intensity of the debate, the usually calm and collected General Zettour finally raises his voice at his friend. Not even the freezing temperatures in the east could cool down this room. So much so that I find myself toying with the idea of maybe opening a window.

"What, are you some animal trained to eat at the sound of a bell?! Do you start salivating when you hear a ring?! Use your damn head! Are all those medals just decorations?! You need to think, man, think! Use your head!"

"You're so full of shit, Zettour! Ever since our days at the military academy, you've always played at theories and hypotheses while you procrastinate without ever actually taking action! What do you think will become of the Empire's victory if we don't act now?!"

General Zettour opens his eyes wide with disbelief and shakes his head once more.

"Have you gone mad, Rudersdorf?! Face reality! You're acting senile! What happened to all your discretion?!"

"You've got it backward! You're the one who needs to make a decision! We'll lose our only chance if we don't move now! Do you intend on letting everything we sacrificed go to waste?!"

"You need to think with your mind, not your heart!"

"That's exactly what I'm doing! My rationality is what dictates that now is the time to act! Now is the time to commit! There will be no second chances!"

"It's you who's being backward! Don't be the idiot who throws us into a new fight when there's no need to! Listen to me!" yells General Zettour.

"No, you listen!" General Rudersdorf barks back. Their faces are almost touching as they curse each other out.

They can't see eye to eye on this. It may be a habit of his, but every time General Rudersdorf's arm twitches, it strikes a nerve with Tanya, who is there against her will. I just hope they don't start hitting each other. I've never had to consider what I should do if two superiors get into a brawl. Not in this life or the last. I endure the sudden feeling of vertigo and look away. This is a terrible position to be in. Despite having no power, here I am.

As I'm forced to listen to this anything but constructive discussion, my only means of entertainment is to enjoy the freedom of my thoughts. Though, I'd rather the freedom to up and walk out

of the room… Unfortunately, soldiers don't have this luxury. The most I can do is stand straight at attention with my heels planted firmly on the ground and sigh within the confines of my mind.

I understand the importance of this discussion, but why must I be forced to listen? This must be how the UN Security Council officials feel before they're forced to mediate between two countries. Just as I begin to wonder if I should intervene as they don't seem to be getting anywhere, General Rudersdorf slams his fist against the wall, changing the flow of the discussion once more.

After hitting the wall, he falls silent. General Zettour, on the other hand, sighs with closed eyes. Maybe this means they're finally going to calm down. Or maybe they both realized things were getting a bit too heated. While it does look like they've calmed down a bit…judging from the evident exhaustion in their expressions, it's hard to say they look ready to act rationally again. The two men have been worn down by a frontal assault of emotions.

An indifferent Tanya watches as General Rudersdorf, without saying anything, puts his hand on the doorknob. "I need to get some air," he says before walking out of the room. He leaves behind a lone old man, who remains silent as he looks down with his head in his hands. The general looks utterly defeated.

"Sir?"

"…I need a moment."

The exhaustion audible in his voice, General Zettour could only be described as weary to the bone. He shakes his head, before eventually reverting to his usual scholarly expression. He remains silent, though, as he takes some soldier's tobacco out of his desk and begins quietly chain-smoking cigarettes. It seems he isn't as calm as he looks. Even when engaging the main forces of the Federation Army, he never lost his calm and collected composure. Look at how worn away he seems now. I watch my boss pick up a pen and start tapping it on his desk. No one could ever imagine General Zettour looking up and sending a cloud of smoke to the ceiling like this.

Every once in a while, he closes his eyes and sighs. The cigarette butts having filled his ashtray, he turns to me and starts speaking.

"Do it, Colonel."

Do what? I don't need to ask. He wants me to take care of

General Rudersdorf. It's just, at times like these, when a boss shows signs of hesitation, I know how important it is to confirm his orders.

"Are you sure about this?"

"Are you concerned after seeing me act the way I did earlier?"

I can't answer that question. General Zettour knows this, which he makes evident with a wry chuckle before redacting his question.

"You don't need to answer that. I'm prepared to accept the dishonor in my actions. But…that man is still my friend. I truly hoped that he would change my mind about this."

His loneliness can easily be felt in the thin tone with which he speaks. The General is silent for a moment after that. He rubs his chin, staring off into space before finally uttering:

"It seems there is more humanity left in me than I thought."

"With all due respect, sir, we are all humans. I hope you're not just realizing this now."

"That's funny coming from you, Colonel. Do you consider yourself a human?"

"I'm as human as can be. I'd even go so far as to say it's my destiny as a human to destroy anything that bars my path, whether it be a god or a devil."

I'd sooner believe there is no invisible hand guiding the market before ever recognizing Being X's existence. It's a matter of ego, really, that the self is different from the other. I firmly believe that all humans are free to think whatever they want, but they are also free to dissociate from the delusions of others and retain the right to protect themselves.

"Spoken like a true aerial magic officer. I…may have used up most of the humanity left inside of me."

"Sir?"

"It's nothing. What I need for you to do is to make General Rudersdorf the Imperial Army's next field marshal."

He wants me to assassinate his friend. What makes this scary is the fact that he's never done it before. Were General Zettour the type to hold grudges, we wouldn't be having this conversation in the first place.

Sharing a sense of rationality makes it possible to overcome all hurdles.

It seems there really is nothing more important than trust when it comes to people.

"Understood, sir. I'll be back with the bad news later."

Clack.

Tanya gives a firm salute, clicking her heels together before leaving the room. General Zettour watches me as I go. He absent-mindedly thinks about the confidence with which this tiny officer left the room, about how today, in particular, he could hardly comprehend how powerful she seems. He wonders if his own guilt made him feel this way, or if it was something else. Does he feel bad about making a subordinate do the dirty work? Or maybe these feelings come from calling his friend a bastard before stabbing him in the back.

"Who knows."

He has fought wars for far too long. It's no longer difficult for him to shut away his feelings. For the next short while, he smokes his cheap soldier's tobacco while thinking poorly of himself. Cigarettes have grown on him, though he would've never even considered smoking them before the war. Everything has changed, and it did so a long time ago.

But, even so…

"…I thought I was still myself."

He doesn't even know if his decisions are his anymore. He has always been forced to make his decisions based on the situation, to find the path with the least resistance in the face of the inevitable collapse. Is this really his decision? He swallows a sigh, shakes his head, then turns to his only friend—his cigarettes. It tastes like shit, the soldier's tobacco he'd grown accustomed to. The general can't afford to drink the pain away, at least not yet. He needs to at least wait for the bad news.

"No, that's not right."

He stops himself, and with the driest of grins, he gives a self-deprecating chuckle.

He's going to kill his friend. To him, this is the worst thing he could do, but also what the army needs.

"I can't tell the difference between good and bad news anymore."

Duty.

Necessity.

Friendship.

He begins to question which of these are real before shaking away the thought.

"This is total war."

There's no going back. It's all for the fatherland.

No… He sneers. *I am despicable to my core. I only need the fatherland's history and future to understand me. I can't ask for anything more.*

"I need to stop being so stubborn and let go of this last bit of humanity."

A human can't do what needs to be done. The Reich doesn't need an officer. What the Reich needs is rationality…

It needs a monster.

OCTOBER 3, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, THE SKIES ABOVE THE EASTERN FRONT

An additional flight flies over the skies of the eastern front heading to the capital. It carries the shining stars of the General Staff, with General Rudersdorf heading the group of high-ranking officers. The guard detail that follows the plane is also armed to the teeth. A single company handpicked from the elite 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion surrounds the aircraft as they fly. The mages easily follow the cargo plane cruising at a medium speed for the long trip. Considering where the Empire is in the war right now, it's quite the lavish envoy.

Despite the chronic shortage of soldiers in the Imperial Army, dedicating a whole company to protect this precious flight is only permissible due to the importance of the people on board. That being said, it isn't the most robust guard in terms of sheer numbers. The company is made up of no more than twelve mages.

For a general from the General Staff Office, this is quite meager. As the one heading the convoy, I remain anxious and discontent throughout the flight…but as an actor in a conspiracy, I understand how this works to my advantage. For you see, Tanya is about to pull an Akechi Mitsuhide and the plane is her Honnouji. Fewer witnesses is a good thing.

Every now and then, though, the world likes to throw you some curveballs. As Tanya waits for the right moment to strike, a new, unexpected challenge appears.

"Warning, warning! We've spotted enemy bombers!"

I turn and see my adjutant with an intense look in her eyes, and her clear warning brings an abrupt end to my conspiring about our plane's *unfortunate accident*.

An enemy?

"They appear to be a few kilometers away from the lowland industrial area."

I take out my binoculars to see for myself while my adjutant calls out the contact. It doesn't take long to confirm a group of approaching planes. They're painted in camouflage, but the group is big enough to spot them easily. It's difficult to figure out an exact count, but we can tell at a glance that there are multiple planes.

"It's an enemy formation."

Their bombers stand out, but what's more alarming is the silver plane with four engines on either wing. They've brought the big guns today. I've seen them before in the skies of the western front, but never in the east.

"Where did they come from?"

This is a strange altitude for them to be flying at.

"Maybe they took off from a carrier?"

This is the first explanation I can come up with, based on an operation we once conducted. Maybe they are loading large bombers onto carriers like Doolittle…but even then, they could never load this many.

There is no way a ship could support this many aircraft, which naturally leads to the next conclusion.

"It must be a shuttle bombing mission!"

I never considered the possibility of this. Ignoring your enemy's tactical options, no matter how improbable, is never a good thing. Let's see, a bomber could feasibly make a one-way trip through Imperial airspace and reach the Federation. Then they could refuel on the ground before making a return trip to the Commonwealth. There's something that doesn't add up, though. A slight suspicion. I feel an unsettling feeling as I fear for the worst.

"This can't be a coincidence, not with this timing…"

Our convoy is about to clash with an enemy air unit. Though it is a bit to my chagrin…this is actually a good thing for us. At the same time, it's the worst possible thing that could happen. Tanya knows that good coincidences tend to be a lie. Is this a deus ex machina? No, there's no convenient plot points to be found here.

This shouldn't be happening. There is no way this is pure

coincidence, which makes this the same as the encounter over the skies above Bougainville. As the security detail, we need to fulfill our duty… To think we would-be assassins would have to play the role of honest protectors. Why did things turn out this way?

We can't do anything suspicious when the enemy is here watching our every move. What a pain in the ass!

"We'll delay our engagement for a full assault. For now, get the package out of here."

"Commander… Doesn't this give us the pretext for forming a tighter formation around the package…?"

"It would be too obvious. Show some restraint, adjutant."

"Is that a problem?"

"We need to be aware of onlookers."

Of course, if there is a way we can pull this off without dirtying our own hands, that would be for the best. We'll guard our aircraft, but if the enemy is willing to do the hard part, then there's no need for us to intervene.

"I never…wanted to have my subordinates do this in the first place… Maybe I'm getting too soft."

"…Thank you."

My adjutant's thanks catches me off guard at first, but I quickly realize that perhaps there are still remnants of humanity—the desire to protect oneself—left in her as well. Or maybe she just feels bad about the friendlies on board the flight who will be sacrificed? Whatever the case may be, I'm glad to see she still has her humanity about her, which brings a smile to my face.

"Enemy mages heading this way!"

Hearing the warning, I turn my attention back to the enemy.

"Oh boy, this is no joke."

The tiny specks off in the distance flying toward us from the enemy bombers are not bombs but mages. I'm surprised to see they prepared a plane just for the mages like some sort of glorified tank desant. I see we're not being discreet about this decapitation strike, are we now?

What's frightening is their numbers, though. There's more than a battalion's worth of mages in the sky. Their advantage in numbers will be painful for us, but that's not all—even their formation is tight. Not just in a practiced sort of way. They are moving so quickly that they're comparable to us.

And here I was thinking the world was in dire need of mages. It

looks like I was wrong, considering all these rat bastards who decided to show up today!

"Shit. This isn't just some random encounter."

"…Yes, there is nothing random about it."

My adjutant looks around before coming close to me and sharing her concerns.

"Do you think it's true there is a spy in our ranks?"

It's good that she's suspicious of leaks, but Tanya would rather be wary of the dangers of properly applied math and logic.

"I can't deny that there may be a mole…but it's more likely our codes."

We really need to do something about our telegrams. The inability to send information easily is truly cumbersome. I can already see all the messages I'll be ordered to deliver after this, but those worries can be saved for later.

"Visha, I need you to send an alert to Air Force Command. We're going to need support."

"Are you sure about this?"

"I can tell how skilled they are from the way they're moving. I imagine they already expect us to call for backup."

The loading bay of the cargo plane wasn't exactly comfortable compared to what General Staff was used to flying on. These planes were designed to carry massive loads of cargo and only cargo. Which meant the general and his entourage were essentially treated like extra-large baggage.

After his intense argument with General Zettour, an exhausted General Rudersdorf sat on the plane with his eyes closed, trying his best to think about other things. Usually, he would use time like this to knock out some paperwork, but…he couldn't bring himself to do it that day.

His opinion was so different than his friend's. They couldn't even see eye to eye on the situation. Even for a man of his fortitude, he felt a deep-seated conflict and pity toward his friend who couldn't understand his perspective.

He would be snapped out of his mental stagnation by the unthinkable. The cargo plane hit some unpleasant turbulence. The moment he picked up on this, his mind quickly kicked into gear.

“What’s going on?”

“Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff and her mages are in the middle of intercepting an enemy attack! They’re asking we withdraw ASAP and—”

The captain’s voice cut off mid-sentence before wavering as he delivered more bad news.

“Emergency message from the 203rd! They’ve confirmed enemy mages heading our way!”

His voice carried through the cargo bay like a tremor. The passengers were all quiet. They looked at one another before turning their attention to the head of the General Staff.

“You don’t think they’re here for…”

The man who found himself with nothing to do during his flight came to a quick conclusion.

“Sir?”

“They may have gotten the drop on us.”

“D-do you think you’re being targeted by the Commonwealth?!”

The passenger shouted this out, hoping it wasn’t the case. Sadly, for most of the people on the cargo plane, they knew this feeling all too well. It was a highly effective tactic, after all.

Decapitation. It was known to be one of the Empire’s signature techniques. For the staff officers who made frequent use of this tactic with a relatively high success rate, this was an all-too-familiar sense of uneasiness. They were certain this was an assassination operation planned by the Commonwealth. That is…except for the man who was the target.

“Oh…?”

General Rudersdorf folded his arms and gave a wry smile on the inside. Strangely enough, he hadn’t suspected the Commonwealth to be the culprit until it was mentioned.

That’s quite strange—almost interesting, he thought with a bittersweet grin as he quietly rubbed his chin. He wondered why he suspected somebody entirely different.

Why was the first person to come to mind, if even for a moment, that idiot Zettour?

With her target’s suspicions within the cargo plane unbeknownst to her, Tanya angrily shouts her orders into her radio in response to

her fake escort mission turning into an actual escort mission.

"This is Salamander 01! We need you to scramble, now!"

I continue to yell into my radio, but to no avail. Eventually, I get a response from ground control, but it isn't the response I desire.

"This is an emergency! We need aerial support!"

"…This is Reich Control to Salamander 01. Reich Control to Salamander 01. We can't send anyone out! I'm sorry!"

For a moment, I wonder if I'm hearing things. Are they refraining from sending reinforcements in order to ensure the assassination goes smoothly?

It can't be. I quickly quell my suspicion. General Zettour may have significant influence, but there's no way he could ever pull something like this off. For starters, the Empire isn't capable of pulling off a blatant attack of this scale anyway.

I shake my head and then maneuver through the air in order to keep the enemy from getting a clean shot on me while I bark at my radio.

"What the fuck did you say?! This is our Air Defense Identification Zone!! What, are your pilots sitting with their thumbs in their asses?!"

"We are currently intercepting an enemy fleet heading for the imperial capital!"

"What about the second interception unit?! Eastern planes will work!"

"We don't have the planes to spare…"

"You must be shitting me! This is a top-level request! This is the General Staff! Confirm the aerial defense priority codes, now!"

I was given the authority from aerial defense command to call for reinforcements for this high-priority package before the mission.

Did they give us the authority to summon nonexistent planes?

"Send us your aerial mages! Anyone who can deploy, we need them…"

Upbeat music began playing throughout the cargo plane, making everyone on board the flight open their eyes in shock. Such a jovial tune would warrant such a reaction for anyone whose lives were on the line. That said, the shock felt by the telecommunications

technicians was in a league of its own. The blood drained from their faces, and no effort was made to hide their sheer confusion.

"Are they jamming our radio signals?!"

"What's the meaning of this?"

The answer to General Rudersdorf's question was short and simple.

"They know our exact frequency!"

It was the frequency used by the General Staff. It shouldn't be this easy for an enemy to find it so quickly, but unable to deny what was happening, all traces of color drained from the communication officers' faces. They all knew there was no way this was a coincidence. Even if the Creator himself told them it was a coincidence, they wouldn't even pretend to believe him. Despite the immense shock of this stunning realization, the officers could do nothing but watch the fight unfold from their plane seats. They all plastered themselves to the windows to see what was happening, and they didn't like what they saw.

"Th-the enemy mages have broken through the 203rd's guard!"

"That's impossible?! There shouldn't be any mages who can do such a thing…!"

In contrast to his fellow passengers who were in a panic, a calm General Rudersdorf spoke to them while he looked out of the window.

"It's their numbers."

He knew not even the Empire's—maybe even the world's—most elite mages, the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion, could realistically protect a defenseless cargo plane from an entire battalion.

He'd heard before that speed was where the Empire's mages excelled. There just wasn't any way for them to keep a plane this slow safe.

"Hmm, they're all skilled mages… It's becoming increasingly difficult to believe this is all a coincidence."

As strange as it was, the more he thought of how much the Commonwealth was putting into this assault, the easier it was for him to accept. Strangely enough, it didn't even make him feel unpleasant in the slightest, despite his life being on the line.

While General Rudersdorf donned a wry grin, the situation quickly worsened. One mage platoon did everything in their power to stem the tide of enemy mages, but they were being pushed away and slowly dispersing. A different platoon tried to take up a position

to provide cover fire, but it was untenable due to the enemy's relentless hit-and-run tactics.

"Urgent message from the 203rd! Th-they want us to prepare our parachutes!"

It was the call the officers were waiting for. The men were ready to jump. Each with a parachute in hand, they stood dignified like the Imperial Army staff officers they were. They would run up to the general and urge that he too prepare for their escape.

"The mages are going to collect us wherever we fall! Hurry, General!"

General Rudersdorf sported a broad smile on his face, thinking about how grateful he was to have a staff who didn't think twice about trying to save his life before their own.

Although, he would know why.

"General, your parachute…"

He gently shook his head at the young officers desperately trying to hurry him.

"It's too late for us."

A Commonwealth aerial mage had the enemy cargo plane in his fire range. He'd only been told that the plane carried "important cargo." He didn't know what the contents were and he didn't care. What he did know was that it was valuable. That much was certain, because the Intelligence Agency told him so! They'd selected him for this special mission, and he intended on carrying it out.

"I have you now!"

A two-pronged explosion formula manifested around the mage. He knew it was a risky position, but he wanted to blow the plane out of the sky. However, he suddenly felt an ominous sensation cross his skin. Accepting that it would render his own formula ineffective, he followed his instincts and took evasive maneuvers. Immediately after, he felt a massive explosion bloom behind him, penetrating his protective film and hitting his defensive shell. Barely managing to withstand the blast, he saw two mages start flying evasively and wondered if he was in their range.

"Damn it! It's their guard dogs!"

It was a pair of Imperial aerial mages. They charged toward the Commonwealth mage as he veered away. As they closed in on him,

they swiftly swiped away the smoke with the flash of their magic blades. It wasn't a move any sane mage would make. He'd expected this, though, as he was warned repeatedly by analysts of the dangers of the security detail.

Those intelligence agents really pull through when you need them, he thought to himself while keeping an eye on his new opponents. As he watched, he noticed how incredible their mobility was.

"They're fast as shit?! Maintain a base of fire! Keep their leader in check!"

The mages kept their distance as they started casting to return fire.

They peppered their opponents' flight path with disciplined fire, enough to blow ordinary mages out of the sky. These mages, however, easily weaved through their barrage.

"They're too fast!!"

The way the enemy slipped and slid through the air went against everything the mages knew about magical engineering.

"Son of a…!"

The mages felt chills run down their spines. They knew one small mistake was all it would take for their heads to fly. The Commonwealth commander promptly raised the alert level. He surveyed the battlefield and cursed to himself before reaching for the radio.

"Company α—wait, company β too! Scatter the enemy! Find their leader! She's a Named mage! The queen of all Named! That godforsaken Devil of the Rhine!"

What were the guys from intelligence thinking?! The target was far more than *troublesome*.

"You call this *troublesome*?! That doesn't even begin to describe what these mages are!! Those damned liars!"

It was a close call.

With the plane in range of the enemy formulas, the Empire's mages had used their own defensive shells to cover the plane at the very last moment.

"The mages are here! It's L-Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff! Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff and her mages are defending the plane!"

As the passengers on the plane cheered, they heard Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff yelling into her radio through the music next to the plane.

"Salamander to Reich Control! Requesting medical on the ground! This is urgent and high priority! Calling all airports…"

Ah, that's right. We aren't safe from harm yet.

"Salamander to Cargo! Get the package out of here! Damn it! They aren't letting up…"

Even the mighty Degurechaff makes idle complaints at times. What an expected discovery.

Despite the situation, General Rudersdorf was still, strangely enough, finding a way to enjoy himself.

I hope I can tell that idiot Zettour about this some time.

"…They say man is overly suspicious of his surroundings."

"Sir?"

"No, it's nothing."

He had suspected his friend for no reason. It was embarrassing. If it really was he who was lost and confused, maybe he should've listened to his friend. General Rudersdorf gave a wry grin as he pictured Zettour's old mug.

"They're coming back this way!"

So be it. I'd rather it be only the enemy who wants me dead.

"No, General…"

The crew member couldn't finish his sentence.

He would never speak again. With their mages unable to keep up with the enemy's numbers, a formula found its way to the plane.

The blazing fire he'd see in his final moments was red.

"I underestimated those damned Albion chaps. They're all far more bloodthirsty than I'd ever imagined."

It is one hell of a game of tag we've found ourselves in with the enemy mage troops. If we're being serious here, the moment I figured out this wasn't a random encounter, I shifted gears from self-protection and complicated ambition to the part of actual protector…until even throwing myself in front of the cargo plane wasn't enough to protect it.

Tanya watches as a single burning cargo plane falls from the sky. Just look at how thorough the enemies are with their spells!

They set the entire plane on fire, turning it into a fireball before blowing it up.

"There's nobody left for us to save after that."

As we try to get closer to the blast, we are met with a wall of suppressive fire. It's also clever how they have their planes draw near with a clear path to withdraw every now and then. The Commonwealth is thorough with their tactics. It appears they are dead set on giving General Rudersdorf his next two ranks. It's almost funny how overt the attack is, though. I almost want to laugh out loud.

"This is terrible."

"Colonel? In a way…isn't this an ideal way for this mission to play out?"

"You have a point there…but it's too perfect. There are parts of this that are too much for me. Those Commonwealth agents are really on top of their intel."

I'm half astonished and half thankful. With a grumble to the sky about the bizarre three-way standoff this operation had become, I use my Elinium Arms Type 97 Assault Computation Orb's mobility to do the talking and order my troops to accelerate.

Without anything to guard, escaping is our new top priority. Although, being the social animal Tanya is supposed to be, she's hesitant to use the word *escape*. It's a force of habit, really. As she considers herself an expert communicator, she always makes a point to choose her words wisely.

"We're going to break through them! Time for our revenge match!"

My adjutant, who knows the details of our operation, gives me a side glance, to which Tanya answers with a shrug. Nobody actually expects us to come out on top of this. The attack was a peculiar piece of collaboration between General Zettour and the Commonwealth Intelligence Agency. The fact that their plans never took each other into consideration is what makes it a strange turn of fate.

As for Tanya, who was wrangled into all of this, it would be really nice to have something to show after all of this… Something like a few Commonwealth heads should do. I need something to prove I fulfilled my moral obligations!

"Get ready to…hm?"

The relentless checking fire suddenly dissipates. Wondering

what's happening, I look out and see the enemy staging a full withdrawal. We can't chase them even if we want to, as they board the cargo bay of what appears to be a new model of bomber. It isn't something we'd be able to keep up with. We'd pass out from the lack of oxygen before reaching them.

An irritated Tanya shakes her head and makes a new decision.

We may as well give them a little parting gift.

"Prepare long-ranged optical formulas!"

At my word, my mages begin casting. While we do manage to get some shots in, the enemy soon escapes beyond our range. Bright glimmers of debris can be seen falling from the planes as they regroup and fly off into the distance, but I don't have time to lament letting them get away.

This is where the real problems begin. Tanya scowls in midair at the thought of the cumbersome difficulties that await her, and this one looks like a real doozy.

I don't even want to think about all the trouble I'll have to go through after we get back. I hate nothing more than the question of who is at fault, but such is protocol. I fly to the nearest base and requisition a telephone, skipping all the usual pointless procedures. After kicking in the door on the operator, I demand they connect me to the eastern front.

I didn't foresee, though, what would happen next. You see, I'm calling from a military base. Now, considering her priority level, Tanya's call should be processed without delay. However, there is a small yet bothersome misunderstanding in this regard due to this line not being the highly prioritized General Staff line I'm used to using.

I tightly grip the transceiver. It's amazing how much yelling, threats, and coaxing it takes for the operator to connect me to eastern command.

A wall of bureaucracy blocks Tanya from making a simple call. They give me all this formal crap about jurisdiction and me being unreasonable! I guarantee this wall is as tough as a Federation mage's defensive shell. No matter how much I tell them it's an emergency or how much I demand they make haste, the operators move at their own speed. It's almost commendable.

I never thought my stress could achieve the levels it does by the time I eventually reach General Zettour. Nothing bothers me more than time wasted. I have to stop several times just to calm myself

down! Being the person of culture I am, it pains me to have to make my murderous rage evident with my tone of voice, but I eventually manage to strong-arm my way through the operators to get to the person I'm looking for.

In a markedly General Zettour fashion, he jumps straight to the point with a poignant question.

"What is it, Colonel? Aren't you on duty?"

"…I'm sorry, General. I need to apologize for what has happened."

"Did something go wrong?"

Though this is a military line, we are wary of outside listeners. General Zettour acts nonchalant, but I can hear a heaviness in his tone.

He must be concerned about the outcome of our mission. I try to find the most straightforward way to convey that it was a success and also an utter failure.

"I…plead for your mercy."

"Tell me what happened."

"We've failed to carry out the mission you assigned to us."

There was a reason I chose to say we failed his mission instead of failing to protect our target.

Was the assassination a failure? The blood almost audibly begins to drain from General Zettour's face before Tanya hits him with news even more shocking.

"A Commonwealth long-distance bomber attacked the cargo plane with the General Staff officers on it. I regret to report that we've failed to protect the package."

"Wait, Colonel."

"I believe it is as you suspect… These events prove that it is very likely the enemy has thoroughly cracked our codes."

We did have our suspicions. In any case, the attack showed that the Albion chaps are highly confident in decryption capabilities. Anyone who knows even a little bit about the Cold War or the two world wars knows that cryptography is a massive battlefield of its own, and the boys in the Commonwealth would take on any cipher so long as they were provided scotch to go with their bland food. That's all they do in decryption school.

Those who understand the importance of intelligence tend to be the most tenacious of fellows. I know this from experience in my past life. Considering the recent events in this world, Tanya is

already reasonably sure that their codes have been decrypted. After taking the perfect timing of this last attack into consideration? It's safe to assume our codes are responsible. Simple reasoning proves those suspicions. With this powerful new evidence, I believe I'll be able to persuade the Imperial Army and Empire as well.

OCTOBER 4, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, THE COMMONWEALTH

The Commonwealth had demonstrated that they could pull off an attack deep within Imperial territory and did so in a politically significant way thanks to using their ally's—the Federation's—airports to execute the attack. But even more importantly, the rank and file were emboldened by the sweet taste of victory.

"""We did it!"""

This was the cheer that spread through the department the moment they received the report: *Target Eliminated*. Even the strategists had crammed themselves into the Analytics Department as they awaited first word of the results. The entire room exploded with triumphant cries the moment they learned the attack was a success.

Gentlemen they may be, these men were still only human, and their jubilant reactions were simply expressions of their humanity.

Wine, whiskey, and cigars. Such were the staples for a celebration such as this. If a hunter nails his quarry, they should be congratulated.

They had outmaneuvered the Devil of the Rhine and shot down the plane carrying General Rudersdorf, a source of so much grief for the Commonwealth.

"""Long live the king! Cheers!!"""

They'd won in the war of information. It meant that they were above their enemy when it came to intel, and the surprise victory may have indicated they were the best agency in the world. They'd even managed to kill their target right under the Devil of the Rhine's nose, a Named they'd been reluctant to challenge until now. This alone was a victory in and of itself, one that more than deserved celebration in the Commonwealth Intelligence Agency.

THE SAME DAY, THE IMPERIAL CAPITAL

Meanwhile, the deputy director of the General Staff had finally reached the imperial capital with a scowl. Via a plane, of all methods.

The General Staff officers who knew he was coming sent a party to pick him up. They all felt relieved when they saw the cargo plane in the distance, along with an escort of six fighters, steadily approaching the capital.

It arrived almost exactly according to schedule. The cargo plane tipped its nose down, beginning its descent as they watched from the ground. Either the pilot made it a habit to be cautious about his flying, or they were carrying a very important person.

They knew this must be the right plane. Which was why the officers hurried to the base's runway the moment it landed. They weren't quite expecting the people who got off the plane first: a group of medics. One of the medics glared at them to let them know they were in the way as a large group of sick and injured soldiers was ferried off the plane on stretchers. Even more peculiar was that the person they were looking for wasn't anywhere to be found. They double-checked. This appeared to be the right plane.

With no idea what was going on…the group of officers then witnessed an even stranger sight. The aircraft escorting the cargo plane were single-seated fighters. Unaware of when they even landed, they'd see a thin-faced man jump out of one of the cockpits the moment it finished parking on the runway. He made his way over to the group of officers—who'd been making themselves a nuisance for the wounded soldiers—and pulled them away from the plane's cargo bay.

Standing in front of the officers, who appeared unable to completely process what they were seeing, was a man wearing a thin grin like a young boy who'd just pulled off a practical joke.

"Well, I wasn't about to ride on a cargo plane."

General Zettour, the new deputy director, sported a devilish grin as he strutted to the car they'd brought to pick him up. Counter to the victors, who enjoyed all they could drink, all that was left for the losers was to stomach their bitter defeat. Though his dramatic return to the capital was impossibly swift, there was a limit to how smooth things could go. The expression of General Zettour, who

had been reinstated to the General Staff Office, was all but cheerful. Quite frankly, the fire in his eyes was the only life detectable in the utterly exhausted man. It was as if the general, who still had the wind of the front lines at his back, now shouldered an even greater burden.

"It's been a while now, hasn't it? My regards, gentlemen."

He kept his return speech short, not issuing a single order.

General Zettour was known for his scholarly presence, and yet he'd shooed his officers back to work without so much as a proper greeting. It was very unlike him. Those who knew what'd happened whispered that it must have been because of his great loss, but those like Colonel Lergen, who was a bit more familiar with internal affairs, had their own suspicions. Whichever the case may have been, there wasn't a single officer who doubted this decision.

This was the man who'd handed one defeat after another to the Federation in the east. He was a genius who created little to no problems for those in the rear. General Zettour's presence was a critical factor in recovering stability in the General Staff Office.

"Anyone but General Zettour becoming General Rudersdorf's successor is unthinkable."

This was the collective opinion of the General Staff, no matter what any outside bureaucrat or politician had to say. The General Staff was, for better or worse, the General Staff, and as such, they moved with incredible speed after the incident. Due to the emergency at hand, General Zettour was terminated from his position in the east as an inspector and given the unprecedented title of Deputy Director for the Operations *and* Service Corps.

The army would stand firmly behind this decision even if it met resistance from the government. In the name of keeping themselves a separate entity from Supreme High Command, they firmly pushed their personnel choice through.

The Emperor would reluctantly allow their decision to pass, but his reluctance was insignificant to the General Staff. He asked the General Staff to submit three candidates, and they selected General Zettour, Deputy Director Zettour, and Inspector Zettour.

The Emperor was undoubtedly shocked by their cheeky response, but General Zettour would meet with him to discuss the promotion behind closed doors. What was said? Not even the members of the Imperial Court—the curious bunch of little sparrows they were—would find out. All that they knew was his

promotion was confirmed.

In the face of the results, any ill rumors suggesting he finessed his way into the position with one of his cons meant nothing. The General Staff got the leader it desired. His reception by the court would go down in history as a joke, given how his international reputation as a con artist was well known at home.

His powerful new position put him in control of both operations and strategy for the Imperial Army. However, it was hard for General Zettour to appreciate working at the imperial capital. He felt it amounted to polishing the General Staff Office's chairs with his ass.

"Well, my title certainly is longer. This tests my ability to lead our organization, let alone a military clique."

He sighed, and the colonel sitting next to him chimed in.

"This does effectively create a single leader of the army."

General Zettour shook his head at Colonel Lergen's words. The colonel had also made his formal return to the General Staff. With a lonely expression, the general tapped his finger on the desk that had a new owner. He was replacing his friend Rudersdorf, who had been killed in action only a few days prior. The room was his now. They were friends for most of their lives, and he never thought he would be one to take advantage of his death.

That being said, Colonel Lergen had no way of knowing what the general was feeling on the inside. Should he ask? Or should he remain silent? With slight hesitation, Colonel Lergen took a few calm breaths to maintain his poker face. Regardless of the colonel's temperament, he was a fully trained staff officer…and this was the lens through which he viewed the world. His professional knowledge made certain details stick out to him. If it were simply curiosity, it would be better for him to keep his questions to himself. However, as it was a matter of duty, he decided he couldn't remain silent.

"It appears Colonel Adelheid and the military police are snooping around the office."

He didn't need to say what they were looking for. Or perhaps he was afraid to say it. If somebody overheard him, he wouldn't be able to explain himself. Though there was hesitation in his voice, he expressed what he needed to, as General Zettour knew precisely what the colonel was getting at. Thus, a smile quickly formed on his lips.

The smile, however, was not matched by the stern gaze in his eyes. Perhaps it was thanks to having dabbled in poker that Colonel Lergen managed to endure the never-before-seen intensity that crossed his superior's face without faltering. Either way, his ability to maintain his composure was rewarded with a simple answer.

"He's a friend of mine. You don't have anything to worry about."

It apparently wasn't a problem. But in what context? What hand had Zettour played in all of this? Was he innocent? Or had he already washed the blood off? In an attempt to discern this, Colonel Lergen asked his next question.

"Will you be attending the funeral?"

"I have work to do. Either way…I can save my apologies for when we meet in the next life."

He wasn't going to attend. And what was this about apologies? Thinking carefully about what this could mean, Colonel Lergen almost blurted something out…

"Sir? I'm not sure I…"

"…Let's just say that for the first time in my life, I owe the Commonwealth my thanks. There's nothing more for me to say on the matter."

At the very least, he hadn't been directly involved. But he still felt guilty. Maybe he'd hoped this would happen…despite his long friendship with the man. Or was it the opposite?

That would explain… Colonel Lergen began playing with a new idea before stopping himself. He shook his head and purged the thought. Any more consideration into the matter was crude guesswork. Instead, Colonel Lergen looked General Zettour in his eyes and asked the final question he was obligated to ask.

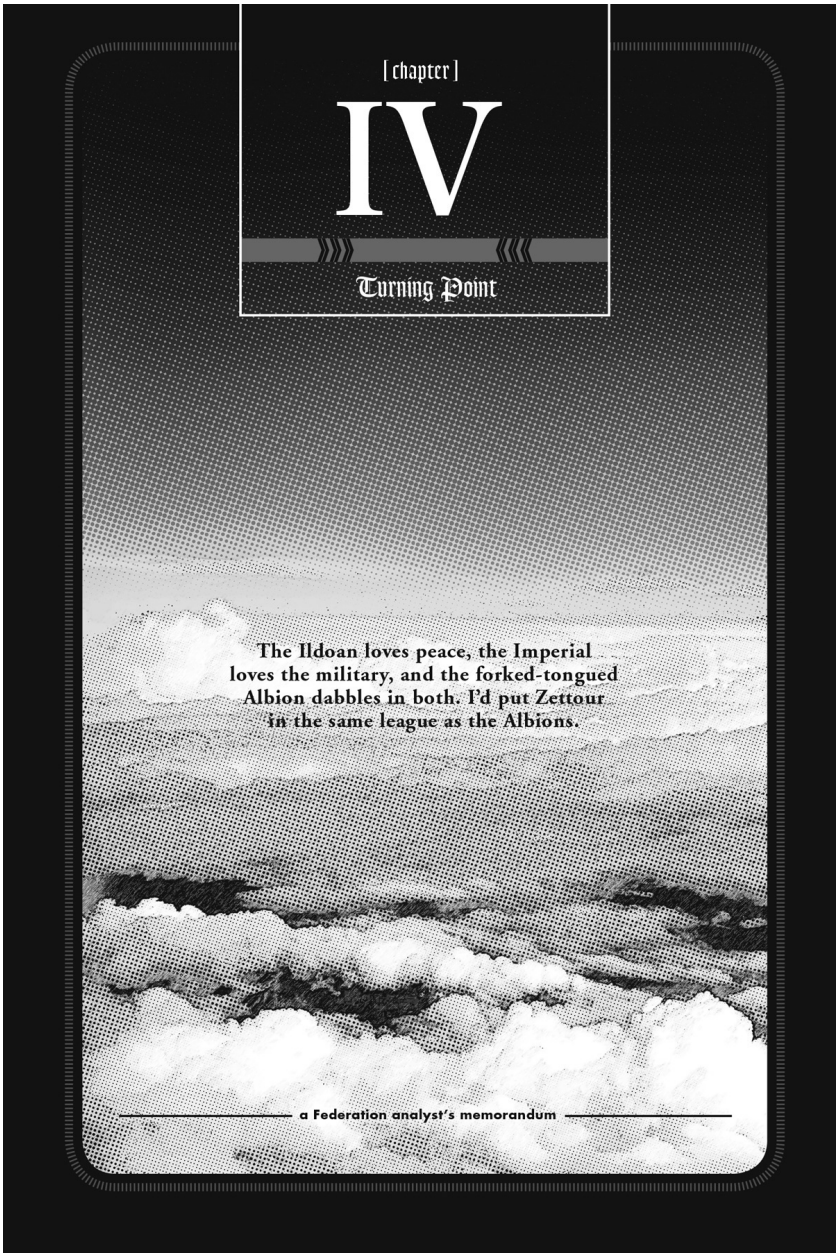
"Is it safe to assume you'll do what you must for our country?"

"Colonel Lergen…I am a slave to my duty, just as you are. And I believe it is high time we face our terrible reality."

[chapter]

IV

Turning Point



[chapter] IV Turning Point

OCTOBER 16, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, ILDOA

Ildoans loved peace, and that was the truth. They loved it from the bottom of their hearts because peace was both glorious and beautiful. But most of all, it allowed them to go about their lives without trouble. Was there any cause nobler than peace? Taking this idea to another level, was there anything sweeter than peace in your own nation?

An Ildoan would tell you no. Were it possible, they would pray for world peace, but seeing as that was unrealistic, they at least wanted it in their own nation. This shouldn't be cast off as egotistical, though. They were merely honest with themselves. The same went for peoples of all nations, really. Why should someone have to lay their life on the line just because the news reported war had broken out in another country?

The Ildoans were no exception. When the news came on while they ate dinner, they would genuinely sympathize with the victims.

How awful, those poor people, things must be so difficult for them.

They'd share a pleasant conversation on the topic while enjoying a delicious meal before climbing into their beds for a good night's sleep. Well, that may not have been the case for all of them —some Ildoans out there may have wanted to help by sending some donations. Some Good Samaritans would even go out of their way to find different channels to assist the victims in the name of peace, but even for these Ildoans, the war was nothing more than a fire across the pond.

This was also true in a political sense. If anything, it was

especially true for the politicians. From the perspective of the rational Ildoan politicians, there couldn't be anything more illogical than that clashing of the Empire and the Federation. Sensible considerations based on their raison d'état dictated that the profit margins were long gone in this drawn-out Great War.

The Ildoans rightfully observed that there was nothing to be gained from war—that it was a waste. It was the obvious, sensible conclusion.

What is to be gained from so much killing? This was the question they could never comprehend.

The truth was that war was a highly unprofitable venture. According to the reports gathered by the Ildoan diplomatic missions around the world, war almost always required pouring a nation's workforce into the battlefields. So they wanted to maintain a modicum of distance. They weren't so neighborly as to join a country in war just because they shared a border. There was simply no obligation for them to do so.

Thus, Ildoa chose to remain neutral. They knew it was a thorny path to take, that the Commonwealth would call them a bunch of opportunists, but they didn't care. They also didn't care if the Empire shamed them for forgetting the spirit of their alliance. Shame was much better than idiotically throwing their nation's youth and future into the hellish fires of war.

The Kingdom of Ildoa and its politicians were, for better or worse, loyal to their interests. Not only that, but there was no reason for them to rouse their people to participate in a fruitless war. They were quite clear about intending to side with the winner in the end. No, that's not quite right. It was more like they wanted to avoid being pulled down by the loser, or worse, have the battle come to them.

This was all they could ask for, to be left alone. Their one and only goal was to remain neutral.

It went without saying that this was highly infuriating for the nations involved in the war. When pressed to pick a side, the Ildoan diplomats would spend all their efforts maintaining a delicate balance between preserving harmony with the winning side and not doing anything that might threaten their ties with the *other side*. Doing so would draw ire from those who thought this dishonorable, but their opinions were of no concern to the Ildoan diplomatic corps.

The government's job was to maintain its people's health and wealth. Therefore, they saw it fit to keep their people and resources as far away from the battlefield as possible.

They were loyal to their duty—nothing more, nothing less. It should be noted that it wasn't as if the Ildoans took their obligations lightly. They sincerely desired to maintain relationships with both sides…to the best of their abilities. From this perspective, armed neutrality seemed like an ideal stance to take.

It was to be a defensive alliance with the Unified States that would guarantee their protection. Intended to be a purely defensive alliance, it was a sort of insurance that would never require them to go on the offensive—a form of risk hedging in case they ever found themselves on the receiving end of an attack, all without the risk of them needing to attack anyone else. Moreover, Ildoa had been objectively observing from the sidelines that the Empire's victory was growing impossible. If this was the case, then maintaining a level of distance until the end of the war made the most sense to the Ildoan Foreign Office. So they had nothing to lose from collaborating with the Unified States, which was aligned with the Commonwealth.

From the Commonwealth's perspective, it was the perfect first step for creating a framework the Unified States could use to mingle with the old world. It would allow them to welcome the Unified States back with open arms.

But what about the Unified States? It was a good move for them, too. This alliance could act as a foothold for the Unified States to increase their involvement in old-world affairs. The move wouldn't be too provocative in the public sphere. It was the relatively logical interventionist position they sought and an appropriate position for Ildoa to play nice with the world powers in the pursuit of their foreign policy aim of containing the Empire. However, the Ildoan plan was even more profound than this, for they took pride in the fact that their diplomatic machinations would also prove profitable for the Empire.

The deepening of Ildoa-Unified States relations would make them an ideal candidate for mediating an end to the war. This could prove to be a new avenue for negotiating peace on behalf of the Empire. But it went even further than this, which was something they were quite proud of.

Ildoa could theoretically use armed neutrality as a pretext for

keeping the Unified States out of the war entirely. The alliance would serve to bring the continental powerhouse that was the Unified States both closer to and further from the war. For example, the Ildoan authorities could keep tabs on the Unified States merchant ships by holding mutual inspections in the name of neutrality. There was a risk, though, that the Unified States and Ildoa could both end up as the Empire's opponents should its defeat become overly evident. At the very least, the alliance would more than give the Empire the precious time it needed. It was a thin tightrope, but the Ildoan diplomats proudly walked it.

As an added benefit, if Ildoa could bring the Unified States' soldiers into its borders, it would also decrease the risk involved with the Empire potentially trying anything *rash*.

Thus, with this new diplomatic relationship blossoming, the Ildoan diplomats spread the message of their new, important role through its worldwide network of diplomatic missions. It went without saying that the first country to receive their flowery message would be its neighbor, the Empire. Naturally, as the Empire was sensitive to its neighbor's developments, it would receive the news with the utmost levity.

The Empire, however, was the Empire. The history books would sadly comment that the Empire's execution of the theory of total war would put it on a collision course with Ildoan political interests. For better or worse, the Empire was already backed into a corner. The world its citizens lived in was far too different from where the peace-loving Ildoans resided.

THE SAME DAY, THE IMPERIAL CAPITAL

General Zettour had returned to the capital after General Rudersdorf's death. Though it was thanks to the efforts of those involved with the incident that confusion was kept to a minimum… changes up top always shake up the rest of an organization.

The General Staff was no exception.

The organization twisted and turned as it was filled to the brim with a feeling of anxiety. The office was historically known for its air of authority and formality, even during peacetime. At this point,

though, it was something only the older officers would remember with a sigh. The circumstances for the Empire's war effort were quickly deteriorating. Especially after the most recent, gut-wrenching political debacle they wrangled themselves into.

It was around this time when the General Staff would receive word of Ildoa's *switch*. Even the officers who were growing accustomed to the seemingly endless barrage of troublesome happenings were blown away by this development. It didn't matter how used they were to stress and anxiety. This turn of events was a devastating blow that made them quiver as they spoke.

Word of the news mercilessly ravaged the General Staff Office.

There are signs of an Ildoa-Unified States alliance.

An officer on duty would shout this when he received this report.

"The Ildoans are changing their diplomatic policy? The hell they are!"

He swiped the paper out of his subordinate's hand and read through the page with only hatred in his eyes before crying to the heavens.

"They're going to form a mutual defense pact with the Unified States?!"

What followed were words of disdain.

"Those Ildoan scum…"

There was no rationality, only hate in his cries. The blatant display of emotions wasn't something one would ever see in the General Staff Office before the war. It was, however, how the officers working in the Imperial Army truly felt on the inside.

The ripple of rage and confusion soon turned into a tidal wave that would engulf the entire General Staff. Resent quickly echoed through the halls of the building.

"This is a direct repudiation of the Empire-Ildoa alliance! Why would they do this?!"

"Those goddamn hyenas! Have they no honor? No shame?!"

"Why didn't our incompetent Foreign Office officials pick up on this?!"

"The same goes for the military attaché! What the hell were they doing this entire time?! God forbid they were too busy stuffing their faces with all that delicious Ildoan cuisine!"

With emotions high, the entire office was of one mind as they openly expressed their rage. It was more than enough for the

officials to express their shock verbally. The feeling of betrayal was just that severe.

"I can't believe they would take advantage of us while we're at our most vulnerable…"

"So this was their true intention behind their claims of friendship!"

It wasn't as if the officers, shouting together in a shared fit of rage, had forgotten the meaning of the word *raison d'état*. If they were looking at the news from an outside perspective, they would probably go so far as to compliment the Ildoans for their diplomatic prowess.

They were, however, a part of the equation. Setting aside different levels of awareness of how it may seem, anyone in their right mind who knew the Empire was going through hard times should understand what this news meant.

How dare they was the emotional response that cast Ildoa in a despicable light. It made them look like the enemy. The harrowing circumstances the Imperial officers faced in their own country made venting their anger feel like a sweet, irresistible poison.

They could recognize that they could ill-afford emotional displays.

They could understand why they needed to face the situation with level heads.

They knew Ildoa was in a position to choose its allies.

But that didn't mean they could accept it.

From the perspective of an Imperial soldier, who wasn't in a place to choose, the Ildoa-Unified States joint-neutrality agreement inspired never-before-seen outrage. It was enough to rouse the wrath of the entire office. There were no godlike officers in the current General Staff. They were all just regular people.

The situation met its peak when an unprecedented call rang through the office.

"I'm missing the payment papers! Who has them?! Where are they?!"

Their ancestors must've been rolling in their graves. The General Staff Office's workflow had come to a complete halt.

"Everyone! Back to your desks! Get your work in order!"

A superior officer was calling his men back to work? Never in the Empire's history was such a scene conceivable. Even at war, the General Staff's officers were always on top of their work. It was a

point of pride for their predecessors. People once spoke about how its perfect officers were what made the General Staff. The protracted total war had ruined the precision of this integral part of the Empire's instrument of violence.

They didn't have time to lament the deterioration of the war machine, though. The merciless hourglass was letting more sand fall by the second. While the army could avert their eyes from the clear time limit placed on them, a staff officer was forced to bear it in mind. This was the reason for their grieving.

Having seized the momentum in the east, most officers were busy trying to reassess the situation there. News of problems from the south hit them like a bolt from the blue. Would they let the diplomats deal with it, take military action, or ignore it and focus on the east? The situation was far too grave for that. Any decision would impact the Empire's military policy, and by extension, their nation's fate.

With the General Staff being the nation's instrument of violence, the distraught officers would look to the helm of the machine for an answer.

"What does General Zettour think?"

The officers gulped with anticipation as they waited for their leader's orders. For them, waiting for the general to weigh in on the situation was extremely taxing on their nerves.

So, what was he thinking? The new leader of the General Staff continued to walk his own path despite being thrown into all the chaos.

His return from the east and the General Staff's efforts to propel the general to his current position were both conducted with unprecedented haste. When faced with this new problem in the south, however, General Zettour hardly reacted at all.

"An alliance to protect their neutrality? Between Ildoa and the Unified States? Thank you for the report."

He thanked the messenger for delivering the report to his official residence, then announced he was going to eat breakfast before leisurely starting his morning routine.

When he got into the car sent by the General Staff for his commute, he shrugged off any questions regarding the matter by mentioning he hadn't clocked in yet. The other passengers tried multiple times to get an explanation from him, but he was only interested in talking about personal affairs, such as family issues,

friends from the war, or how the officers spent their days.

He occasionally brought up the General Staff Office, but he only touched upon mundane affairs. It was clear that the general was blatantly avoiding the subject. Senior officers from the General Staff could understand why a superior might want to keep their opinions to themselves. Though they wanted to know what he personally thought, they also knew when it wasn't worth pressing the point. They accepted that their shots in the dark had missed their mark.

The last thing they wanted was to face repercussions for pressing the matter too hard, so they backed off. It was assumed that he'd share his plans once they reached the office.

Contrary to their expectations, however, the entourage would pass off the general to Colonel Lergen, who would sit next to his boss and watch as he started his work for the day just as the clock struck office hours.

And what a relaxed way to start his day the general showed! He was even so bold as to enjoy one of the cigars General Rudersdorf left behind.

"That idiot… How disgraceful to keep such good cigars stowed away."

A look of amazement wiped the stern expression off his face. He then smiled and took one of the cigars out of its case. He began to fill the office with smoke, nodding with satisfaction as he did.

"I can't say I'm a fan of this brand, but we're at war. Beggars can't be choosers."

Letting out a plume of smoke, he enjoyed the fragrance before repositioning the cigar in his mouth. Working in an office meant the humidity was kept under control, something Zettour seemed to enjoy as much as the cigar itself.

In an abstract way…there was something happy-go-lucky about how he enjoyed it. As if the tension permeating the office was nonexistent, General Zettour nonchalantly offered a cigar to Colonel Lergen, who stood at attention next to his desk.

"Join me."

Despite all that was going on, there wasn't a hint of tension in his laid-back offer. He held out the cigar case in what amounted to nothing more than a superior asking his subordinate for a nice smoke break. Naturally, Colonel Lergen's demeanor didn't match his boss's.

"General, I…"

The colonel's roundabout rejection of his offer, mixed with his troubled tone, made General Zettour shrug with astonishment as he placed the case document onto his desk.

"Well, you're no fun."

He was so calm as he let out another plume of smoke in the same breath as he spoke.

Colonel Lergen didn't understand how he could act like this. How could he be so unbowed despite the bad news?

"So you're not willing to entertain an old man? Or are you so narrow-minded that you can't have a little fun? You can't be that busy."

Colonel Lergen decided to voice his discontent, but not without a wince of hesitation.

"Well, it's just that I can't get the recent developments shown by Ildoa out of my mind… The entire office feels the same way. I'm sure the section chiefs asked your opinion before coming to work this morning."

"They were hounding me all morning about it."

"Excuse me, sir, but to see you react so lightly to military affairs like this is quite shocking for me."

"I'm more shocked to hear that coming from you."

General Zettour exhaled more smoke before grinning at his subordinate.

"To think something as trivial as this would have you and the managers in such a bind has me worried about the state of the General Staff. I never expected things to reach such a low."

After a moment's hesitation, Colonel Lergen decided to speak up again.

"Judging by your words, I assume this means you already have something in mind for Ildoa?"

"I take that back, Colonel Lergen."

He put his cigar down into an ashtray before cheerfully resting his elbows on the desk and folding his arms. The tension in his lips loosened into a grin as he stared down the colonel.

"To my surprise, it seems you still have your wits about you."

Anticipating his superior's words, Colonel Lergen gulped. In contrast, General Zettour was as collected as he always was.

"I decided what we'd do the second I heard the news."

The general seemed dissatisfied with his decision, despite the conviction with which he spoke. He scratched his chin and showed

a wry smile.

"Well, maybe saying *I decided* what we'd do is a bit misleading."

"My apologies, sir? Do you mean to say you were forced to make a decision?

The colonel wondered this aloud, and his suspicions had hit their mark.

"That's exactly right."

He tapped a finger on his desk, and General Zettour showed a deadpan expression for a split second.

"We are effectively left without a choice in the matter. Our next course of action has been decided by the Ildoans, not by us."

An alliance of armed neutrality was a threat. Ildoa was being blatant about how it tried to put as much distance between itself and the Empire as it could. Colonel Lergen, however, also saw the merit in the development.

Though likely a formality, the nature of their alliance was officially *armed neutrality*. This meant that the Empire could use Ildoan channels to compel the Unified States to uphold its obligation to remain neutral.

Whether or not this was Ildoa's intention with the alliance, it was a million times better for the focus of the Ildoa-Unified States alliance to be neutrality and not aggression. Of course, this was simply what the colonel could hope for. He knew that veering on the side of optimism was a dangerous bet, but if they played their cards right, the alliance may just buy them some time.

Colonel Lergen also knew of the vast array of other problems at hand. Should winter come, it would be difficult for the Empire to advance into the mountainous region on their border to the south. If they were going to attack Ildoa, it needed to be in the spring, but the Ildoan border would surely be fortified by then. Moreover, he knew that General Zettour was one of the leading voices protesting a rushed preemptive strike against Ildoa.

All things considered, it seemed very likely that they would maintain the status quo, for now.

"Here's the directive we will go with. Colonel Lergen, my apologies, but could you create a draft for me?"

"Yes, sir. What are your orders?"

The colonel readied his pen and paper, and as if placing an order for food at a restaurant, General Zettour gave his brief orders.

"Send these out immediately. All officers are to submit a draft

for an attack plan. Our target is Ildoa."

Repeating his superior's orders aloud up until *immediately*, Colonel Lergen was suddenly hit by a wave of confusion. His brain was having difficulty processing the words as they reached his ears.

The colonel blinked a couple of times before shaking his head.

"Come again? Pardon me, sir, did you just…?"

Maybe his ears were playing tricks on him. What did he just hear?

With his voice audibly trembling, Colonel Lergen questioned his superior. With a tone of stark interest, General Zettour answered in his usual calm manner.

"What's this? Did all the heavy artillery finally take its toll on your hearing? Perhaps you should get your ears checked."

"S-sir?!"

"Our target is Ildoa. I want you to send the orders out immediately."

It wasn't a joke or a problem with his ears.

The general's orders were meant to reassure the colonel, but he couldn't have been more shocked. Colonel Lergen was at a loss for words.

"I-I'm sorry, but… are you insinuating we attack in the winter?"

"Colonel Lergen, the General Staff Office does good work. With the arrangements Lieutenant Colonel Uger made on the railway's side of things, we can pull off a winter assault, depending on the strategy. We can knock Ildoa out of the equation."

"G-General Zettour! You were so insistent about avoiding such an attack…!"

The despair could be heard in his voice as he cried out, but his superior wasn't going to fold.

Of course I was, General Zettour seemed to say as he nodded with the same calm attitude that could be described as his regular self.

"I still feel the same way, but as I said, they've forced our hands."

General Zettour sighed.

He then took the cigar out of the ashtray to continue smoking it. With a dry voice, he expressed his annoyance at the situation while taking out a match to relight his cigar.

"Throwing *armed neutrality* into the mix effectively flips the table, which goes against my original sentiment. Now that they've

gone and done this, there isn't much room for discussion on the subject."

It wasn't his choice—he never had the freedom to make one.

“It’s no longer a matter of what I’d like to do. Ildoa forming an alliance of armed neutrality with the Unified States takes them from acceptable risk to a nonperforming loan for the Empire.”

General Zettour would’ve let them slide if they were nothing more than a bomb that would never go off. The *risk* of a possible explosion was about as much as he could tolerate from their *ally*.

However, was this the case if they were going to put pressure on the general’s timeline? Time was of the essence, and the Empire didn’t have a moment to spare.

“We don’t have time. This is our biggest problem, Colonel. The most I can do is continue our struggle, even if it is in vain.”

Despite knowing this wasn’t something he could say aloud, for the Empire to take the initiative—even if it was only to lose—it would have to prioritize defusing this bomb while Deputy Director Zettour was the only man on watch. It was the same as tearing down wooden houses in the path of a raging fire. Another problem was that the necessary pieces hadn’t fallen in place yet. If Ildoa was going to make itself a nuisance on this front, it needed to be dealt with, even if it meant overturning the entire warfront. Sometimes, planned destruction was the only way to avoid collapse on a larger scale.

This was why a dispassionate General Zettour continued down this path. Leading the army was his job, and he would see to it.

“It is hard to accept Ildoa’s self-righteous raison d’état. We need to fix their misunderstanding that this is an ordinary war. This is a world war, Colonel… This is a world war.”

As his nation’s leader, he was advancing the plot his country would follow in an all-too-natural manner.

The words left his lips in a cloud of smoke.

“You know about his plan too, I imagine.”

“I’m not sure what you are talking about, sir.”

“The Ildoa attack plan Rudersdorf had you craft while he was still alive. I read through everything he had filed away in that little safe of his… Don’t try to play it off like you don’t know about it.”

He shot the colonel a glance like a test proctor. Realizing he couldn’t feign ignorance, Colonel Lergen capitulated.

“My assumption is that it was a front-loaded attack plan…”

As far as Colonel Lergen could tell, the Empire’s power was

depleting at a rapid rate. Even worse, they would have to cross the mountain range on their border to make it to Ildoa. It was clear to him that the fight needed to end quickly. The Imperial Army was in no condition for a follow-up attack. They needed to end the fight in a single decisive blow if they wanted any hope for victory.

"My guess is that the attack would be a gamble. One that placed our bets on speed and took past mistakes into consideration."

"That's a wise guess, Colonel. It's almost exactly what Rudersdorf had in mind."

General Zettour grinned as he confirmed Colonel Lergen's conjecture. Given the premises at hand, any General Staff officer worth his salt should have been able to come up with a similar answer.

The Empire didn't have any spare manpower left after sending so many into the quagmire in the east. With the trench warfare in the west wearing away what little remained, clear collapse was coming soon. The last thing the Empire could afford was losing any more of its people. With an entire generation sent off to war, depleting what was left of its population would result in giving up on the Heimat's future.

So, should they bombard the country to hell with artillery fire to spare lives? This was the answer a textbook might offer.

The Empire knew from experience that their doctrine of orchestrated artillery fire was tried and true.

This, paired with proper infiltration tactics, could handily defeat the enemy should they rely on trench warfare and extensive fortifications.

The Empire had pulled this off both in theory and in practice. If the army could opt for a full-frontal assault, they would do so without hesitation. Although, if options were still on the table, the Imperial Army had absolutely no reason to engage with Ildoa in the first place.

With the Empire having been at war for so long, it wasn't the same country it used to be.

Where were their artillery shells?

Where were their guns?

It only got worse from there. Where were the provisions they would need to conduct trench warfare?

And as if it wasn't bad enough that the railway was in poor

condition, how would the army be able to mobilize everything necessary to fight a war of attrition on this scale?

Where was the Empire's steel? Its oil? Its precious metals? Where were any of the resources the Imperial Army needed to continue this war?

The Empire's chronic lack of resources dulled its leaders' wits. There was a single last-ditch conclusion the General Staff officers who had used up their common sense as kindling for the raging fire of total war would come to…

Since it won't be possible to fight for long due to our lackluster stocks of artillery shells and other supplies, the army would have to conduct an aggressive assault and finish the engagement quickly.

General Zettour gave a wry chuckle. While he struggled to figure out the vague itinerary his friend had left behind, he imagined the dimwitted General Rudersdorf racking his brains to come up with an answer.

"All in all…it's a terrible plan. Quite unlike anything I'd expect from him."

The way he shook his head and showed a smile of bewilderment spoke volumes of the general's disappointment. Even more evident was the hint of scorn in his voice.

"How dull," he let slip out with a sigh. "The devil is in the details."

He let out a sad sigh of grief.

"It should be obvious, even for an idiot like Rudersdorf. Seems like he carried too much on his shoulders and forgot the essence of what it means to be a strategist."

The general shook his head, retrieved a bundle of documents from the safe next to his desk, and handed them to Colonel Lergen.

"Read this," he said before returning to his cigar. As he finished decorating his ceiling with a nice plume of smoke, he turned his attention to his subordinate, who appeared to have finished reading the documents he'd handed him.

"With all due respect, sir, this seems a bit adventurous for an assault plan, if anything…"

Colonel Lergen thought the plan seemed practical, though he wouldn't get the chance to voice this opinion. Before he could defend General Rudersdorf's plan, he was interrupted by a pointed sigh.

"It's far too typical. It's nothing more than a bit risky."

Colonel Lergen stared blankly at his boss. General Zettour's inner strategist made his expression twist up in a wince as he continued.

"Colonel, the plan reads like something straight out of a textbook."

"Y-you think you can find a plan like this in a textbook?"

The answer to this question was a firm nod, void of all hesitation.

"Remember the east, Colonel."

Only now realizing that Colonel Lergen wasn't following him, General Zettour suddenly took on the role of a friendly teacher and prodded the colonel to think for himself.

"This is a good learning opportunity for you, Colonel. What do you think this plan is missing?"

"It needs to prioritize breaking through the enemy line…and perhaps a well-executed ambush."

"That is exactly right. It needs a frontal assault. The same approach I used on the Federation in the east. Tell me, Colonel, do you know what they call me over in the east?"

A trickster and a con artist. One of the better words they used was *magician*. Colonel Lergen wasn't about to say something like this directly to his superior, though.

After a moment's hesitation, he would choose an indirect way to respond.

"That you are a man of many tricks."

"That's a nice way of putting it. At the heart of that sentiment is the reality that the Empire is no longer in a position to execute simple frontal attacks. We would have surrendered a long time ago had we been playing by the book."

Making his defeatism apparent to a fault, General Zettour slowly stood up and faced a picture hanging on the wall.

This was the office that belonged to the deputy director of the General Staff, so the pictures on the wall were all suitably famous paintings. The one General Zettour took an interest in was a picture that depicted delight in a way that accentuated romanticism.

It depicted the Empire's history. It was an innocent yet honest—and not entirely unabashed—expression of the nation's ego derived from both the unification of the fatherland and its many victories.

The painting was one of optimism. Hope for the Empire's future. For victory and honor. It depicted fearless warriors who

forged this great nation and never doubted their fate. Of course, had the portrayal of great battles been less emphasized, there may have been room for a more discreet and subtle aesthetic… In any case, this painting hung on the wall of the legendary stage that was the General Staff Office.

The general imagined his many predecessors likely sought out perfect strategies. Perhaps this masterpiece acted as a reminder to them of their responsibility toward history.

What the current owner of this office sought, however, was not victory but a way to weather his nation's defeat. The gap between the artist's emotions that had been poured into the painting and the general's was so tremendous, it made General Zettour feel miserable just looking at the painting… But what else was he supposed to do?

Colonel Lergen could only speculate as to the general's innermost thoughts, but one thing was for sure: He'd never seen the general look so vulnerable as he did while he gazed at the painting.

"We need to rewrite our nation's textbooks. There are volumes and volumes of textbooks written about victory, but not a single one that even toys with the idea of processing defeat."

The general shed some light on the predicament he wrestled with. It was almost painful how much Colonel Lergen resonated with his sentiment. An agonizing conflict tore him apart from the inside. He had no response.

General Zettour eventually turned away from the painting to show the colonel a wry smile before continuing.

"Tales of valor are beautiful, but they aren't of much use to us now."

The general, worn away by his time in the eastern quagmire, spoke with an exhausted voice as he stood in sharp contrast with the painting of an optimistic future.

"Reality is cruel and ugly, but also undeniable."

However unpleasant.

However undesirable.

As much as they wished it wasn't, this was the reality in which they lived. Everything that happened to the Empire was undeniably real.

Total war had transformed into a world war, which made their prospects abundantly clear—the facts were merciless.

War was fought with numbers.

Even though it was people fighting on the battlefield, they were

no longer individuals. They were all numbers. Though the death of one man may be a tragedy, there was a sick perversion in how quickly a leader learned to sacrifice tens of thousands without a moment's hesitation.

General Zettour let out a sigh before dragging himself back to reality and returning to his post—his desk.

"Perhaps I'm being a bit pedantic."

Setting himself in his seat, the general glanced up at the ceiling for a moment. Colonel Lergen didn't know this, but this glance was out of curiosity…to check if there was maybe a picture up there.

But…just as he imagined, it was a regular old ceiling.

I bet my predecessors never had to look to the ceiling for answers. I'm jealous.

General Zettour grimaced on the inside before returning to the topic at hand.

"We can follow Rudersdorf's plan for mobilizing the troops and logistics. What we're going to change is the main vector of attack. We will not be advancing with a wall of soldiers."

"Are you going to utilize the same tactics you used in the east?"

"That's correct. We'll focus on penetrating their line by using tricks. This time, we'll be using their roads."

The carefree attitude with which he said this did not match the oversimplicity of the suggestion. Any officer who knew the current state of the Empire would have found the proposal incredibly difficult to swallow.

"You intend on having the soldiers use the roads to advance…? If we're going to use the roads, sir, we will need air superiority."

Roads were good for quick offensive thrusts. The lack of obstacles made it possible to move very fast on roads. However, the same lack of obstacles also made any soldiers using the roads *prime targets*. In other words, a single enemy aircraft could easily take out any soldiers or vehicles caught out on the roads. Without air support, even entertaining travel by road was out of the question.

"Sir, our air force stationed to the south is simply not capable of this mission. Due to peace along the Ildoan border, we've only set up the bare minimum of aerial defenses in the region." As much as he didn't like this fact, it was Colonel Lergen's duty to share this information. "The plan I just finished reading only included limited aerial support, and we don't have the aircraft to send more to the south. Therefore, I don't think we can meet the prerequisites for a

road-based offensive."

You're wrong about that, General Zettour seemed to say as he shook his head. He believed the principle behind concentration of force made it clear that it was most important when their overall firepower was lacking.

With an intrepid look about him, the general pointed out their options.

"We have the air force to the west. And to the east. In fact, there are aircraft just sitting in their airfields all across the fatherland, including the capital. We may be running low on planes, but we have more than enough to acquire temporary air superiority in a single location."

"…You can't be serious about this."

"Does it sound like a joke to you? We'll use the bombers that aren't sent to destroy the enemy airports to blow apart their railroads as a declaration of war."

The general's words were nothing more than theory-craft, but they left Colonel Lergen speechless.

Air superiority.

Though only a theory, if they had this—

If they could eliminate the threat of enemy air with a surprise attack—

If they could deprive their enemy of any mobility and advance freely—

These questions were all within the realm of wild *what-ifs*. However, these possibilities were far too attractive to reject outright.

"What do you think, Colonel? I want to hear your insight. Do you think Ildoa could hold fast against an attack like this?"

"As far as I know, the Ildoan railroads are operating on their regular schedule.

Colonel Lergen knew this. Ildoa was enjoying peace; they were in no position to move quickly. Not a single Ildoan organization was worried that their country might be forcibly pulled into the war. In fact, the Ildoans were sure that the war would end without them ever getting involved so long as they didn't open the hostilities.

This was why, with great conviction, Colonel Lergen shared his advice.

"They wouldn't have any blockades prepared for us. In fact, in terms of aerial defenses for their airports…I believe it should be

relatively easy for us to disable their runways."

"How long do you suspect they would take to get their railroads and runways up and running again?"

"I believe Ildoa's speed in this regard pales in comparison to the Federation's."

Hearing this, General Zettour clapped his hands with joy.

Clap, clap, clap.

The sound of his clapping filled the room with a calming rhythm before General Zettour finally shared his conclusion.

"Excellent. That means it is a war we can fight."

His words were concise but filled with pride and confidence. If anything, he seemed completely convinced the Empire would emerge victorious.

As if the man were a conductor trying to etch his work into history, he continued to detail the stage he envisioned.

"We shall punch a hole in their defenses and incapacitate them with shock and awe. We'll advance with an echelon formation. If we can penetrate their front line, the path will open up for us."

"It will be challenging, but if this works…"

"We'll make it work. If necessary, we will drive the troops forward with whips. Once the charge begins, there's no stopping even newer soldiers."

Orchestrating the attack wouldn't be simple. Everything had changed since before the war, when the Empire's instrument of violence was in perfect condition. The military had been reduced to a motley collection of young and old soldiers, with almost no in-between. In the current Imperial Army, the leaders needed to contrive ways to have their units move the way they intended. This went double for the officers in command out in the east.

The confidence in General Zettour's suggestion to add momentum made it possible for Colonel Lergen to share this confidence. Their chances of victory were not insignificant. There were ample grounds for them to have hope. Though, this didn't make it any easier for the colonel. His reservations weren't about the strategy itself. The fact that he was discussing attacking the very country he was working on a peace deal with…made the man's head spin.

As he tried to steady himself, Colonel Lergen realized his superior was staring at him.

"By the way, Colonel. I feel the need to ask… Are you all

right…? You don't look so well. Are you in good health?"

"…Well, there are many matters I'm concerned with at the moment."

"Does it have to do with the reconciliation talks?"

Colonel Lergen nodded silently with a grim expression. The remorse for his mistake caused the good patriot great anguish. Had he succeeded, things would've never gotten this bad for either nation.

The confession of his inner turmoil was met with a smile.

"Oh, is that what's got you worried? Colonel?"

"Yes…"

His superior, who'd just been calmly discussing war strategies, took on a gentler tone of voice as he addressed Colonel Lergen's concerns.

"Colonel Lergen, take some time off."

"I can't be the only one resting when there's so much to do…"

Though his sense of duty made him reject the offer, there was a different, extreme sense of discomfort that ran through his mind.

Something was off.

General Zettour was a demon to the core when it came to commanding his men. Was he the type to tell his subordinates to take time off out of consideration for their health? No, he was liable to send even his most exhausted soldiers into a battle of maneuver should the need arise.

What the general said next would directly address this discomfort that plagued his mind.

"You see, the commander for the eighth tank regiment we'll be using in the assault has fallen ill."

"Oh, I see." Colonel Lergen understood the deeper meaning of this remark and wore an awkward grimace. He knew he was about to receive a new mission from General Zettour.

"I'm having a difficult time finding somebody to replace him. What do you say? I think some air would do your body good."

"…I thought you were going to give me some time off?"

"Some say illness comes from miasma in the air. Moving to a place with better air can be quite effective when you're not feeling well. I speak from a place of experience."

General Zettour spoke in the spirit of *it's not what you say but how you say it.* The *place with better air* was a hot war zone.

Though, strangely enough, there was a part of Colonel Lergen

that felt it might actually be good for him.

"Exercising your mind and body outside the office can help eliminate needless concerns. And being able to focus on a single operation should make things easier on you."

The general glanced at him, suggesting that he wouldn't take no for an answer.

Something like this would usually be considered banishment… but judging by the extent his superior was willing to pour his heart and soul into the fight against Ildoa, the colonel realized he was needed at his new posting. The most compelling voice, though, came from the devil whispering in his mind.

If focusing on your work on the battlefield can push all this political and diplomatic business out of your mind, things might finally become more manageable for you.

So he accepted the offer without hesitation.

"Will I be given full authority over my task force?"

This was all that needed to be confirmed between the two strategists. His superior folded his arms and wore a grim expression as he shook his head.

"Unfortunately, you'd only be a temporary replacement. The resident staffer who's filling in. Try to figure it out with the division commander."

"So it will depend on who my superior is."

There was a tone of reluctance in his voice. Not all division commanders would welcome a General Staff officer with open arms —especially not someone who might second-guess them or have a mind of their own.

Picking up on Colonel Lergen's hesitation as he shared his concerns, General Zettour nodded.

"You'll be Lieutenant General Jörg's temporary deputy chief of staff. He oversees one of our central panzer units, but…seeing as you're acquainted with each other, I'm sure you know all about it. That makes this fairly easy, right?"

Fortunately, Colonel Lergen was familiar with the lieutenant general.

"General Jörg and I both came up in the same regiment. He's my senior."

Being from the same regiment often created a strong bond between officers. There was a beautiful tradition in the Imperial Army for regimental mates to frequently meet up and share a

dinner table. Sadly…mates from the same regiment and the food to put on the table had both been running thin ever since the start of the war.

Nevertheless, as they were both from the same regiment, Colonel Lergen knew Lieutenant General Jörg well. They were actually quite close. Working with him would give the colonel a chance to exercise his ability without reserve.

"In that case, it seems I made a good personnel choice purely by coincidence. If you're both from the same regiment, it should be easy to grasp his temperament in the field and communicate."

Was it really a coincidence? The Service Corps didn't necessarily have jurisdiction over where soldiers were placed, but officers were a different story. This may have been the case under General Rudersdorf, but this was General Zettour he was dealing with here.

"I appreciate your thoughtfulness."

General Zettour smiled as he watched Colonel Lergen give a brief bow.

"I bet you're going to enjoy this. I'm jealous, Colonel."

"To think I'd ever hear you say those words…"

Being out on the field always tested an officer's wits. Ironically…many of the General Staff field officers found this to be the most entertaining posting. It was where they could use their authority to fight at a strategic level, and all of their menial tasks could be left to somebody else while they focused on the work at hand.

This was why General Zettour, who had unprecedented pressure weighing him down, half-jokingly expressed his jealousy.

"It's true, though. Just look at me, I have to deal with all this trouble in the rear." With all the authority in the world—and the pressure to go along with it—he continued. "I have to deal with the politicians, diplomats, and whatever other unrelated complications find their way to me, all on top of overseeing our national war strategy. I think I have the right to crack a joke or two."

"Isn't that a bit unrestrained?"

Colonel Lergen was uneasy as he knew this was a rude remark to make, but General Zettour met him with a surprisingly astonished gaze.

"Colonel, if we were fighting a winning battle, we could afford to get caught up in how miserable war can be. We could hate the

war for how terrible it truly is. But I can guarantee from my experience in the east that it's best to discard all your emotional baggage when you're in a real predicament. It's much better to try and enjoy yourself."

THE SAME DAY, THE IMPERIAL CAPITAL

Orders are conveyed from superior to subordinate. There are never any exceptions in this regard. The same goes for the hit-and-run specialists in the Salamander Kampfgruppe who always do various, seemingly unreasonable tasks for the General Staff.

In this way, today, Tanya receives her orders from Colonel Lergen—the messenger.

I open the envelope and immediately start silently reading the documents inside. The first part I read is the date, the author, and the main objective. Confirming the order format is the basic first step when receiving new orders. After determining there is no problem on this front, I make my way through the general framework, only to find the blood draining from my face.

Steadying myself, I look to the messenger, who wears a grim expression. This means two things: he already knows the contents of the message, and the contents do not appear to be a joke.

I hastily start over to try and find anything I may have missed, but it appears my initial understanding of the orders is correct. It is enough to make Tanya physically wince.

She sighs, then voices her opinion.

"I've received your orders to murder the mediators."

"This…isn't what I wanted to happen, either. Quite far from it, actually. But we are soldiers and must carry out the orders we are given, no matter how shocking they may be. Do you have any objections?"

"I have none."

Lower-ranking personnel lose their options once they formally receive lawful orders. It's hard to call this authoritative relationship within the army ideal, but this is how the organization operates. As I am a good modern citizen who wishes to be sincere, I must do my job. The same goes for any civilian. It's a fact of life that many

employees have little choice but to comply when their company orders them to relocate. When it comes to the army, though, the orders can be more severe than simple relocation.

Thus, Tanya willingly swallows her discontent.

"Are you…sure you're okay with this, Colonel?"

"That's a strange question, Sir. I don't have the luxury of choosing my orders… A soldier can only have an opinion up until the moment they are given orders. Now that the orders have been given, my only option is to remove any obstacles that get in my way and thoroughly execute them."

Colonel Lergen reluctantly nods in agreement. It should be added that there is more resignation than understanding in his gesture.

"You're right, Colonel. But, I wonder if these orders are right…"

"Is there something the matter, sir?"

Tanya asks this with good intentions, worrying about him being overworked, overstressed, or sleep-deprived, but Colonel Lergen shares his true concerns with a strained voice.

"They are the mediator… Ildoa is the only country that can mediate for us. You know this, Colonel. We're about to destroy our only path out of this war."

Hearing his words of anxiety, Tanya is confident she's figured out the problem.

It's an issue of narrowmindedness—likely similar to the same problem Imperial Japan faced.

"Sir. Is there a need for a mediator?"

"What?"

There is no need to limit yourself to a single partner in negotiations. We're not the Kwantung Army facing off with the Soviet Union on the border of Manchuria being forced to negotiate a cease-fire or be surrounded. Relying too much on a mediator can be a dangerous thing. Japan's historical failure in relying too heavily on the Soviet Union to make its reconciliation speaks volumes about this. Anyone who knows Japanese history knows there are other ways to do this. Reconciliation is still possible, even without a mediator.

Isn't knowing your history just great?

That's why Tanya can always speak from a place of confidence… If anything, she speaks out of the kindness of her heart in an attempt to relieve some of the colonel's stress.

“Why not negotiate directly with our enemies?”

This would solve all our problems. Even if it doesn’t, just seeing another potential solution is enough to relieve a worker of some of their mental burden. This is a basic HR technique. I expect a word of thanks for the advice. I feel I deserve that much, but…

“Negotiate with an enemy we’re currently at war with…? Are you insane, Colonel?”

The response goes against all expectations. Though she is suspicious as to why he would react this way, being the great communicator she’s proud to be, Tanya will give him the clue he needs.

“Excuse me, Colonel Lergen, but by *insane*, do you mean in the context of war or peace?

“I guess I don’t have the luxury to pick.”

There is loneliness in Colonel Lergen’s smile after he appears to convince himself of something.

“We kill our friends. We negotiate with the enemy. We kill the mediator—this isn’t the proper way to fight a war. The Empire’s rampage has reached its limits…”

“What do you expect? This is war.”

“That’s a convenient way of putting it.”

I offer a vague smile. I wasn’t expecting a response. Colonel Lergen looks defeated as he stares at the ceiling and continues.

“War, eh? I’ve only just realized the duality of war. The flames of war burn away our rationality and common sense.”

Colonel Lergen looks exhausted as he discusses the dreadful nature of war.

“This is why people who fight on the rear for too long end up broken men… Maybe I should consider my time in the east a sort of vaccine. I should probably thank you.”

“If I helped in any way, it was my honor to do so.”

“Yes, thank you, Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff. Thanks to you…I may have found what I need to properly participate in this war.”

“Is it not your nation that sends you off to fight, sir?”

Colonel Lergen stares blankly for a moment before bursting into laughter.

“Ha-ha-ha, that’s probably a better way to think about it. It would be better for my health. Now…Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff. I need you to kill some Ildoans for me.”

“Yes, sir. Tell me, how do you like your pasta?”

“I like it cut it up nice and thin. You don’t need as much water to boil that way.”

“Just give the command and I’ll prepare you a nice Ildoan dinner, sir.”

“I will—if I have the chance. They’re going to overwork you on reserve duty for this one.”

“More unreasonable demands…as always.”

Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff shows a markedly human reaction: a wry smile. It’s a strange sight to see, though. Judging by her age, Tanya should be a young lady by now…and yet, she still hasn’t grown an inch since the colonel met her for the first time on the battlefield. If she showed an amiable smile, it would be that of a little girl. Nevertheless, her current wry smile is that of an old soldier.

He’d never understand this, but it doesn’t really matter. They both share the same fate of being used and abused by General Zettour.

Being one of the general’s most abused subordinates himself, Colonel Lergen almost sees Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff as a comrade in arms as she is about to be sent to the hottest part of the battlefield.

“I’ll be on the front lines as well in Ildoa. Let’s both do our best together.”

OCTOBER 19, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, THE INTELLIGENCE HQ FOR THE COMMONWEALTH

The hangovers took their toll on the agents. Enjoying the best alcohol always came with a painful price. General Habergram sat in his office, smoking a cigar while he faced a new, challenging predicament. There was something gallant about the sincere man, full of pride. It didn’t matter what others would say; Mr. John, who stood next to his desk, would never forget what he thought when he saw the sight.

Even during times of anguish, a gentleman is still a gentleman.

“We should recognize that we misread the situation.”

Mr. John let out a small sigh on the inside as he agreed with a defeated General Habergram.

Just exactly what is going on?

They'd intended on removing a titan, General Rudersdorf, from the war. It should've been a significant blow to the Imperial Army, but it was hard to describe the results as such. Though they disposed of a single monster, to their bewilderment, there was a second titan in General Zettour, who took his seat at the top of the General Staff Office before they knew it.

There wasn't even enough time to blink. Could it be that the man predicted this would happen…? Was it one of the reoccurring *leaks* that brought intel on the assassination to General Zettour's hands? Though the idea was close to delusional, both General Habergram and Mr. John couldn't deny it outright.

Either way, one thing was for sure. With a look of great annoyance, it was as General Habergram was willing to admit.

"That con artist was willing to abandon his post in the east to rise and take his dead friend's spot in the capital. Given the rapid rate at which things are changing, this was likely the best decision for the Imperial Army…but still, is the man some kind of monster?"

The general had moved far quicker than they could have imagined. By the time the Commonwealth Intelligence Agency was astounded by this information, the General Staff had come together and, by whatever means, managed to force the decision to be passed by the Emperor and his government.

It was too fast-paced to even call decisive. They were still putting the glasses they made their toasts with away when they found out about the new development; there was no way they could've done anything to stop him.

The sheer speed at which he moved sent chills down their spines. The con artist must've been an Imperial version of a Commonwealth agent. Either that, or a monster by birth.

In the face of the ominous General Zettour's rising, Mr. John murmured in fear and astonishment.

"The man is a monster… Just when we thought we finally pulled one over on them, they go and flip the table."

He held his hands up as if to show his surrender while shaking his head and sighing.

"My apologies, but I think we may have to tighten up our operation."

The trouble kept piling on. A leak alone was a big problem, but it was even worse if General Zettour could react to their every move by pure instinct.

Was the military monstrosity just as formidable when it came to politics? Mr. John wished he could respectfully ask the man to restrain himself, which was why the gentleman would allow himself to make an idle complaint.

“This General Zettour acts more like a Federation general… Actually, if I’m being honest here, he moves like one of our own. How did he end up an Imperial general?”

“I know, Mr. Johnson. This couldn’t get any more cumbersome. I’ve had the analysts working all night to reevaluate the Imperial General Staff.”

With this newest development being a vital blow to their self-esteem, they were trying to learn more about the man than he knew about himself. They began gathering any and all material on him. This included interrogating their prisoners, as well as going so far as to exchange information with the Federation.

Mr. Kim, who was in charge of Federation intel, grimaced and questioned whether this was worth it. Nevertheless, he made sure to thoroughly exhaust all channels available to him. While General Habergram respected his professional opinion, he insisted it was necessary. It made sense for Kim and the other managers to be cautious when there was a suspected leak, but this was a matter of utmost importance.

Mr. John gave a wry smile as he commented:

“How do they keep being one step ahead of us?”

It was painful for anyone to lose face to this extent. Even the hardest of oak desks would dent if its owner repeatedly hit it hard enough. It was the same logic for an organization. Fortunately, the Commonwealth Intelligence Agency quickly got a hold of the situation. Unfortunately, the reality that was making itself more and more evident was provoking enough to make one worry for the safety of General Habergram’s new desk.

“Things don’t look good, though. For the Empire very well may be under the control of Zettour and his gang.”

“His gang?”

“The three big scoundrels: General Zettour, Colonel Lergen, and Lieutenant Colonel Uger. There is a chance they’ve effectively removed the Empire’s Supreme High Command from the decision-

making process."

"Setting aside General Zettour, the two officers… Wait, did you say Lergen? As in, the leader of the Lergen Kampfgruppe?"

Mr. John had heard the name before, and his memory served him right.

"He was in charge of the task force in the east. You've heard of him before. He is one of Mr. Drake's most loathed opponents."

"But still, it's just a single task force, right?"

"He is similar to you. In other words, an essential person."

This was a troublesome comment for Mr. John.

"You're comparing me to him? You're too kind."

"I'm being serious, though."

"Well, now you're just taking me for a ride."

This was their boss's actual assessment…though it was also a personal opinion. The general had to stop himself from telling Mr. John how much his boss appreciated him.

Either way, this colonel named Lergen was much more than a regular officer. General Habergram was sure that he was a threat.

"Let's cut to the chase. Lergen has been…showing up to diplomatic negotiations in Ildoa. The man is likely General Zettour's eyes and ears. In a way, he is an ideal Imperial-made officer, that man."

"And what about this Uger fellow?"

"He's a railway worker. He does the train schedules for the General Staff."

"He's a fine military officer. But if I'm being frank here, he's just a part of their organization. Is there a reason to include him in Zettour's so-called *gang*?"

Mr. John's superior pointedly opened up a confidential envelope before plopping a pile of documents in front of Mr. John. He looked at the papers; they were written in Imperial. Were they Imperial documents?

"We acquired these documents in the west. Look through them. There is an inconceivably flexible train schedule put in place to keep the war front running. I wish our local trains were even half this organized."

"These are incredible… He's created quite the convenient schedule."

Mr. John committed Uger's name to memory. It was almost menacing, the level of efficiency the man managed to make

possible. A variety of criteria must be met for train schedules to operate, and yet he'd met all of them for every station, allowing for both public and military use of the trains to work without trouble. He was no amateur—and definitely a problem.

With a small sigh, Mr. John shared his malice.

"Fate can be so unfair. It makes one wonder if the Goddess of Arbitration favors the Empire. And here we are, left to our own damned devices."

"Yes," General Habergram agreed.

"It makes me want to destroy what I can't have."

"How much longer will this man be alive?"

"Probably for a long time. He rarely leaves the capital."

Was he a workaholic, or was the Imperial Army being prudent? Either way, it wasn't likely the honest railway worker would find himself in an *unfortunate accident* in the near future.

Being the pious person the general was, the lack of divine grace was…truly regrettable.

"Perhaps it's time we send in the air force."

The suggestion to firebomb the Imperial headquarters was shot down immediately by General Habergram.

"I'm not a fan of rolling the dice."

"Do you prefer cards?"

Mr. John jested before changing the subject to a more lighthearted one. Unfortunately for them both, time was as precious as diamonds for His Majesty's Royal Intelligence agents.

"Now, sir, what was it you called me here for again? If you're looking for somebody to discuss matters of a highly confidential nature, I can go grab a mirror for you."

His joke was met with nothing but a single glance. General Habergram's humor was running thin due to the prolonged war. The lack of sarcasm in the serious explanation he gave Mr. John alerted the agent to his superior's overt exhaustion.

"According to one of our top-secret sources, this trio is on the move."

"Due east?"

Despite how sure he was, the general shook his head.

"The cryptic song the telegraph sings suggests they are making arrangements to murder the Ildoans."

"Oh!"

So their destination is Ildoa! This made Mr. John stand up

straight in attention without even realizing it.

They were heading not east, but south.

"They're going to mount an attack against Ildoa under these conditions? And here I thought the Imperialists at least still had their wits about them."

"The signing of an armed neutrality agreement must have been too much for them to swallow. I'm sure they intend on knocking the country out of the picture before the Unified States soldiers arrive."

"I suppose that makes sense, but I find it hard to believe they have the manpower to pull it off. With General Zettour at their helm, surely they know this—and that's setting aside how preposterous the idea is in the first place."

Though he had a terrible feeling about the news, his instincts were shrouded in a veil of vagueness. He wanted to take a smoke break to gather his thoughts. As far as he knew, there was no way the Empire could win against a third front.

"Have our predictions for their soldiers on the southern border changed at all? Even if they managed to strengthen their border, they'd never make it over the line."

"Read this."

The documents handed to Mr. John told the story of a handful of divisions relocating.

They were train records and documents on the redistribution of aircraft.

"Sorry…but are these numbers accurate?"

"It is a bold but effective move. General Zettour is willing to give up air coverage in every other region to take out Ildoa."

Oh my, Mr. John thought as he blinked in surprise.

Anyone who wasn't a soldier would know the term *air superiority* purely by definition, but for soldiers at war, who had seen the word play out with their two eyes and knew what it truly meant. Calculations quickly ran through Mr. John's mind.

The enemy was General Zettour.

On the Ildoan side…would it be General Gassman doing the fighting? While the man certainly wasn't incompetent, he was run-of-the-mill, and moreover, he came from a political background. Even worse was the fact that he'd yet to experience total war.

"This may not be good for them…"

"You think it will be that bad?"

"General Zettour is the most accomplished con artist of our

times. I'm afraid if the Ildoans have to take him on for the first time, they won't be able to put up much of a fight."

Even the Federation, with its advantages in both numbers and experience, was often at the mercy of the general. Against General Zettour, who was the master of acquiring limited local dominance, it was hard to expect the wet-behind-the-ears Ildoans to be able to hold out for long.

The agent felt a strange feeling.

"Should we tell the army to advance the date for our counteroffensive on the continent?"

"The hell we will."

The unfortunate answer to his question was put bluntly.

"Why must we send our young to die for the sake of the Ildoans? It's time they reap what they sowed for remaining neutral for so long."

"It will be difficult to stand by and watch while this happens to them…"

It was just a bad feeling, and with that being all he had, there was nothing left for Mr. John to say.

As his last stance, he would add…

"We'll have to hope the analysts give us a stellar enough analysis to clear their names."

OCTOBER 20, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, THE INTELLIGENCE HQ FOR THE COMMONWEALTH

Merely handling work that's given to you makes you a third-rate worker. Go above and beyond the call, and finally, you're second-rate. If you want to be first-rate, you must prepare to finish your work before it is sent to you.

When it came to handling their work, the Commonwealth Intelligence agents were far from incompetent. Their accomplishments spoke for themselves, but even more important was the pride they had. Being the professionals they were, their dignity wouldn't allow them to lose a second time. They had no time to be depressed as they pushed forward to their next task.

With revenge in their hearts, they decrypted the Imperial

messages and, without a moment's waste, drew up as many scenarios to base their predictions on as they could.

The Commonwealth analysts did not choose their means when it came to love and war. Surrounded by a thick haze of smoke and with ale fueling their veins, the sharp-tongued thinkers racked their brains with all their might to get an answer. They'd already been tricked by General Zettour once, but it was surprising how accurate the picture they painted could be when they were out for revenge.

On the wall of the office was a big map of the Imperial Army's movements.

About twice a day, the locations for different divisions would be updated, with additional units, including certain panzer units, coming together day by day. Before long, it was amazingly clear that the aerial divisions were being prioritized in their deployment.

Though very limited, it was evident that the Empire would acquire air superiority in Ildoa. The future was also as clear as day when looking at the preparations laid out on a map.

The gloves were off for the Empire. This could no longer be taken as a bluff, and with a new battle on the horizon, the analysts were greatly troubled.

"Have we sent a warning to Ildoa?"

"We've sent many."

The intelligence agents let out sighs mixed with both anguish and surprise. This was a side effect of their nation's lack of appreciation for diplomacy. They did everything they could to strip the Empire away from Ildoa. It was the obvious thing for the Commonwealth to do, but as a result…they'd long been sending message after message warning of the *Imperial threat*.

Thus, Ildoa had grown used to hearing this warning. For the Commonwealth to be up in arms about the Empire was like the boy who cried wolf by this point. Any insistence that *this time it was for real* would be taken with more than a grain of salt.

So was it fair to assume that the gentlemen had done their jobs?

With the levels of pessimism reaching a new high, a new viewpoint would be thrown into the mix.

"Should we tell the Ildoans about the attack beforehand? We could consider sending them our sources, which would make for a better, clearer warning."

A well-known section manager would start this debate.

"Why would you suggest something like that, Kim?"

“First, we must consider the gravity of a second front. Second, failure to do so could spell the end for diplomacy with Ildoa. And third, it would be insurance. If Ildoa were to fall, it would be bad for the entire war front, and it would certainly bring us into a second front.”

The manager brought up three important, factual points. But his peers would find it difficult to agree.

“I see what you’re getting at…but it is hard for us to tell how weak Ildoa really is.”

They knew that the Empire was likely the superior power. But just how superior were they? This they had yet to agree upon.

Not to mention, if the Unified States were to join the battle…it would certainly be difficult for the Empire to come out on top.

“The Ildoans are strengthening their border at the moment, right?”

“Yes, but it doesn’t look like it will be enough to fight against what’s coming. If General Zettour were to hit them with an ambush, he could slip right through their border.”

“If that is the case…then the problem is how far the Ildoan army will be forced to retreat.”

“Isn’t it the opposite? It’s more like, how far is the Imperial Army capable of pushing them in the first place.”

As the lively discussion came to a close, it settled on the question of how far the Empire could advance into the country in a single attack.

They would ambush the country, with ample firepower and air superiority.

It was pretty clear that the Ildoan army wouldn’t be able to defend the northernmost part of its country. The same went for any soldiers on the field, as it would be hard for them to put up a real fight against the Imperial soldiers. The Commonwealth Intelligence agents even came up with substantial evidence that the poor soldiers might be wiped out entirely…

And yet, they couldn’t discount the laws of physics the Empire was bound to, either.

“I give them two weeks at most. The Empire is catching heat in their eastern theater from the Federation. They’re running low on artillery, and what missiles they do have they can’t even transport anymore due to their worn-down logistics network.”

“It will probably end with them stealing some land from Ildoa

in the north."

"That must be their target: to create a line of defense between them and the south."

With that general summation settled upon, the Commonwealth Intelligence analysts came to a humble conclusion.

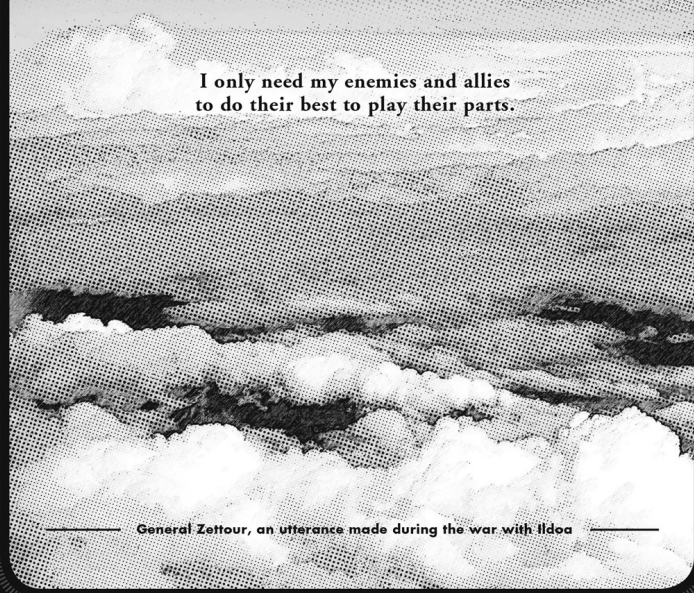
"I guess we'll just have to wait and see what they've got."

They were going to watch Ildoa and the Empire go at it. The Commonwealth would send their silent words of endearment from their hearts.

[chapter]

V

Stage



I only need my enemies and allies
to do their best to play their parts.

General Zettour, an utterance made during the war with Ildoa

[chapter] V Stage

NOVEMBER 10, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, NIGHTTIME NEAR THE SOUTHERN IMPERIAL BORDER

The Eighth Panzer Regiment was considered one of the General Staff Office's primary formations after Colonel Lergen's quick transfer there. It would follow strict orders to spearhead the charge to the southern border.

It was the right regiment to lead the charge, as it was suited with state-of-the-art tanks, a startlingly ample supply of fuel, and the most well-trained soldiers the Empire had to offer—though anyone with a thorough grasp of the basics was considered the *best* at this point.

In recent years, it was rare for an Imperial regiment to be this fit to fight. It was impressive, even compared to elite divisions from before the war.

Needless to say, the role it would take on in the fight against Ildoa would be an important one. As operations were set to start any day now, it wasn't only the General Staff officers who were busy. Thus, when Colonel Lergen learned that Lieutenant General Jörg was calling for him, he figured it had something to do with the regiment.

Colonel Lergen was the head officer. Assuming there was either some new issue or something urgent that needed attending to, he hustled over to the command center, only to be caught off guard by what he saw.

The commander wasn't anywhere to be found.

Wondering what this meant, he looked around the room until

the commander's adjutant beckoned him over with a look. The colonel followed the officer to the commander's private room without any idea what was going on.

When they arrived, the commander's adjutant told the colonel he would *clear the area* before leaving the room. The colonel felt a bit suspicious when he was offered no further explanation. Despite not entirely understanding the situation at hand, Colonel Lergen turned to the room's owner and gave a proper greeting.

"I'm here on your orders."

"Welcome," Lieutenant General Jörg said with a nod before flashing a wry grin. Without giving any orders, he took out a recognizable envelope with a somewhat puzzled look on his face.

"Colonel Lergen, there is a sealed message from the General Staff Office for you."

"For me?"

"Since you're their officer, you needn't mind me. Though, I have my suspicions as to what it may be about. I bet they're special orders from General Zettour. He's probably got something special cooked up for you. It may be a pain, but I know you can handle whatever he throws your way."

"I'll take a look at it… I only hope it isn't something too troublesome."

The colonel expressed his thanks before standing up straight and reading the message. Colonel Lergen would soon curse himself for forgetting that his boss was the mastermind behind Operation Shock and Awe.

His vision began to blur.

"…?!"

He tried to keep himself up by stiffening his core but couldn't fight off the dizziness.

"Colonel? Hey, is there something the matter?"

A worried Lieutenant General Jörg's words snapped Colonel Lergen's expression back to normal.

"Sorry, I…just remembered something I must attend to."

"Does that something have to do with those orders?"

The lieutenant general had seen Colonel Lergen stagger after reading through the message, so it was natural that he would have his suspicions. There was nothing the colonel could do or say to hide this now. However, the commander shrugged and gave a self-deprecating chuckle instead of censuring the colonel.

“My apologies… I shouldn’t have asked.”

He wasn’t going to press any further on the subject.

For better or worse, the lieutenant general was a member of an organization and, as an Imperial Soldier, knew when it was best to mind his own business.

“Do what you must. But let me ask one thing concerning our operation. Whatever you are about to go and do, I trust it will be finished before we deploy, correct?”

“Yes, it won’t take long.”

Colonel Lergen was permitted to leave the room with an “Okay.” He rushed to find the nearest military police officer, whom he ordered to drive him to the nearest long-distance telegraph facility on the encampment.

The officer, who was off duty, met his request with some resistance that the colonel would entirely ignore. Colonel Lergen followed his orders with incredible resolution, brushing off any and all fuss. He acquired a single communications room for himself, kicking a group of disgruntled officers and soldiers away from their phones. He then made sure to have the military police officer keep all personnel away from the room.

Naturally, Colonel Lergen wasn’t the only one on the base who wanted to use the phone. There was an array of different reasons an officer or soldier would want to make a call: for family, friends, loved ones, and work. Despite receiving every complaint in the book from all sorts of ranking officers, the Colonel used the authority of the General Staff to have the military police keep others out and away from the room.

With the communications room now all to himself, Colonel Lergen let out a deep breath. He couldn’t help but shudder as he felt a reluctant sweat running down his back.

Nevertheless, he prepared for the worst and picked up the telephone.

“I wish to make an international call to Ildoa.”

“Due to the late hour, I…”

“By the authority of the General Staff, I demand you make the call immediately.”

After pestering the Imperial operator into complying with his unreasonable demand, Colonel Lergen read out a number he had written down.

“Excuse me, but this is a number for an Ildoan military facility.

Even if this is a military base, only Ildoan associates are allowed to make calls to this number for personal affairs…"

"This is a military matter. One that you don't have the jurisdiction to second-guess. Or are you trying to tell me you are going to block an Ildoan military message on your say-so? This is an official call. If you are going to make a formal objection, you will be liable for any of the consequences."

The Ildoan operator's attempt to push back faltered as soon as the colonel mentioned the word *consequences*. Though perhaps in what could be considered his final form of resistance, the operator took his sweet time putting the call through.

When it eventually connected, someone picked up within the first ring.

"Hello, this is the Ildoan Army Headquarters at the Nostrum military base."

"Is Colonel Calandro available?"

"My apologies, but could I have your name?"

The operator's tone made it easy to tell how suspicious he was of the colonel. He was likely an officer who just so happened to be on operator duty for the Ildoan side. Judging by the younger tone of his voice, he probably performed his duties precisely by the book.

This wasn't always a bad thing for an officer to do, but such inflexibility could only be tolerated when one had the time—and time was running thin for Colonel Lergen.

"This is an emergency. I need you to get Colonel Calandro on the line for me as soon as possible. Do you think I would call at such an hour via a long-distance line if it wasn't for something important?"

"I can't go to the colonel without a name or reason for you calling."

This was a textbook answer. Realizing that this exchange would get him nowhere, Colonel Lergen tightened his grip around the phone as he shouted through the transceiver.

"Do you have the authority to decide what goes through to the Ildoan General Staff?!"

"This is why I need your name and reason for—"

"I need you to cut the bullshit! Tell him it is a call from a business partner! That should work! I am certain Colonel Calandro will pick up the phone even at this time of night! Or are you prepared to accept the consequences for obstructing this urgent

matter with nothing but your own authority?!"

Colonel Lergen placed his trust in Colonel Calandro's quick-wittedness and renown as he demanded this. Though reluctant, the operator finally obliged.

After a short wait where the colonel wrestled with a deep-seated fear that the phone call would end abruptly, he was eventually connected to the person he had been waiting for.

"Yes, this is Calandro. May I ask who's calling?"

The colonel couldn't be happier to hear his Ildoan counterpart's baritone voice. Now it was time for him to fulfill his role. Colonel Lergen took a deep breath and recomposed himself before engaging in verbal mobility warfare.

"It's me, Colonel Calandro. Do you understand who I am by my voice and speech patterns?"

"…Is that you, Colonel?"

"I appreciate you not saying my name out loud. Please understand that I can't say any more than this."

They didn't know who could be listening. Despite having been shaken awake from his slumber, Colonel Calandro was as sharp as ever.

"Oh no. I had a hunch it might be you, so I jumped out of bed… I'm assuming this is urgent? It sounds like you really gave the officer on duty an earful…"

"We don't have time or leeway to entertain bureaucracy. I hope you can understand."

"Yes, of course. Regardless of the time, I'm sorry I kept you waiting for so long."

"That helps…"

Oh? Colonel Lergen could hear his counterpart gulp through the transceiver.

"So, what ever could be this pressing?"

"Right now, I wish for you to commit to memory the fact that I called you."

General Zettour's orders were clear and simple. The colonel needed to leak the fact that they were going to attack. He was supposed to make it seem like an individual act of kindness and send an anonymous report. By sending an indirect message, he could create a sense of trust and earn Ildoa's favor. It was explained to him that this was all to maintain a diplomatic point of contact for future talks after the invasion.

The idea of such an outlet remaining was almost laughable, but the colonel was dumbfounded by the fact the receiver of the leak had already chosen for him. General Zettour had hand-picked Colonel Calandro—General Gassman's apprentice—to make sure word of the leak went directly to the Ildoan Army.

The colonel was to strictly maintain a level of trust so that talks would remain possible after the attack. He was not, however, allowed to send them information on the time or place of the attack.

The orders did allow him to suggest that the Ildoans should be on the watch for potential trouble afoot.

It was a dirty trick. Certainly not something the colonel wanted to be a part of.

Even the few words they had exchanged so far were almost enough to crush Colonel Lergen as he made his call. Limited by the information he was allowed to give, time constraints, and his own inner turmoil, this was the best he could do.

"I'm sorry, Colonel Calandro… That's all I can say for now…"

He wrestled with the idea of perhaps saying more, but his throat was so dry that he could barely speak at all. What he was doing was unprecedented. He was the high-ranking officer of an army warning the high-ranking officer of the country they were about to hit in a surprise attack.

In his mind, he could understand how this was an essential part of the operation. It was an underhanded attempt to keep the door on diplomacy from closing all the way.

There was no way General Zettour had any other intentions in his orders. At the same time, Colonel Lergen understood. He knew that he couldn't do this with enthusiasm. This was because he wasn't a monstrous General Staff officer at his core. He was a human.

He would, however, say something…he felt he needed to say.

"Colonel Calandro…I pray for your health and fortune in battle."

Praying for your enemy's fortune in battle was a strange thing even at the best of times. Which entity would oversee such a prayer for their enemies? Should he pray to God or the devil?

With these fruitless thoughts running through his mind, he felt like the strange situation he found himself in was toying with him as he tightly gripped the transceiver.

“Sorry for calling you so late at night. I must go now.”

This was his subtle way of telling the colonel that they didn’t have much time. Without hesitation, Colonel Calandro let him know that his message had been received.

“You know, I wish we could talk more, but I actually remembered that there’s something I need to do as well. Hopefully we can speak again sometime soon.”

“I hope so as well. It is one of the reasons I called you tonight… Excuse me, as I can’t stay on the phone any longer.”

With these as his last words, he hung up the phone. An exhausted Colonel Lergen then sat back in his seat and let the tension drain from his shoulders. This had truly pushed him to his limits.

Although he conveyed to the colonel what he needed to, it was an excellent opportunity to learn the absolute limits of what verbal communication was capable of. This further solidified his respect for Counselor Conrad, which had been planted during his time playing the role of diplomat.

“A soldier may be bound to their unfortunate fate, but a diplomat…isn’t something I’d ever want to become.”

Though he was acting on General Staff orders, what he had just done amounted to treason. Stifling the overbearing dizziness that set upon him, Colonel Lergen reached for some cigarettes.

“I could never come up with something like this…”

The Imperial Army was trying to preserve its diplomatic channel through Colonels Lergen and Calandro. Though his warning would surely provide the enemy room to maneuver, would this act of friendship really keep diplomatic relations open?

Such a notion was strange, yet it sounded persuasive enough to be worth a try.

He wondered if Ildoa understood the Empire’s desire to maintain this diplomatic channel. He assumed so, seeing as Colonel Calandro even mentioned their *next discussion* at the end of their call. With this, it was safe to believe that Ildoa wouldn’t refuse to talk.

“I don’t think the Empire could ask for a more suitable pipeline to transfer this information through… Though, I’m not sure I should be happy about my success.”

Their plan was a surprise attack, and yet, his phone call would serve as a warning that would reduce the element of surprise. The

notion was inconceivable when going by standard military rationale.

Though a part of him understood why what he did was necessary, he never thought he'd feel this uncomfortable after successfully carrying out his orders.

The unpleasant feeling wasn't something he could describe, which is why he tried to smoke his feelings away. After filling his lungs with cigarette smoke, the most Colonel Lergen could do was breathe out whatever he felt along with a plume of dark gray smoke.

"Why did things turn out this way…?"

He never intended on becoming this kind of officer.

There was never a doubt in his mind that he would be the ideal strategist, the ideal soldier. Creating strategies was his job. He was even ready to take a bullet as he led his troops into battle.

And yet, there he was. He had just made a call that would likely cost him many of his soldiers' lives. Colonel Lergen shook his head, and then, with a cigarette in his mouth, he straightened his hat.

Focusing on the mission at hand was the right thing for a soldier to do at times like these. The colonel had the honor of leading the vanguard for this next operation, and it was his job to take the initiative to do what needed to be done as an officer.

The colonel knew that all of this was merely compensation for his actions. He was an honest enough officer to not run away from the mission at hand, but also not so strong that he could embrace it wholeheartedly.

Even so…

"I've finished my orders. All that is left is for me to lead the charge."

He stood up, then left the communications facility to head for the Eighth Panzer Unit's command center. He told the military police that they were leaving the area and got back into the armored vehicle that brought him there, and was soon hit with a sense of relief.

The burden on his shoulders grew lighter when he announced to the commander that he had returned and headed to the war room.

It was much less mentally tasking to stare at a battle map than it was to stare at a telephone dial in the communications room.

"It won't be long before we start…"

The operation was set to begin at the crack of dawn, together with the sunrise. Colonel Lergen flashed a wry smile as he thought about having a bitter cup of coffee to take his mind off of things.

"Take my mind off of things, eh…? General Zettour really is the dastardly con artist they say he is."

It was obvious that the idea of being sent off to a different war zone as a form of stress relief was a big, fat lie. Perhaps there was a tiny bit of consideration that had been paid to the colonel's mental health in all of this, but the general's true intention in sending him here was a strategic and cunning diplomatic ploy.

No.

Colonel Lergen deliberately changed his outlook.

"I fulfilled my verbal duty. Now I must do the same on the battlefield."

THE SAME DAY, AT ILDOAN BORDER COMMAND

In terms of whether or not Colonel Lergen's message had been conveyed: *It most certainly had.*

It was a sudden call made in the middle of the night. The contents of which were, quite frankly, as suggestive as they were sudden. Even a dimwitted intelligence agent would place more importance on the fact that there was a call over the contents of said call.

In this regard, Colonel Calandro was definitely far from lacking imagination.

Yes, it was the opposite—he was an outstanding information agent for the Ildoan Army. The moment he hung up the phone, he sprang into action. In this regard, Lergen's words had done their job.

The receiver of the message, still gripping his phone, moved swiftly and decisively. The first thing he did was sound the alarm in the middle of the night to wake up all on-site officers.

He had the half-asleep communication officers go straight to their desks and begin alerting all the necessary parties. An officer would be needed to hand-deliver the finer details of the call, but as he knew time was of the essence, he sent out his first report with

haste.

Colonel Calandro could act with great discretion when it was necessary.

“Connect me with the highest-ranking officers you can find! Something is happening over in the Empire. I predict something big is about to happen!”

“You want us to wake up the top brass at a time like this? Not to mention, a conversation like this shouldn’t take place over the phone…”

Although the conservative communication officers sought to stick to their regulations, Colonel Calandro remained firm in his orders.

“Do it.”

“But, Colonel…”

“If we don’t wake them up now, we will surely be hit with a lightning strike.”

The time the clock on the wall showed was of no importance.

This was an emergency, and the colonel knew it.

“Pardon me, Colonel, but how can you be sure about your source? It was a sudden call made by what appears to be a civilian. I don’t feel like this constitutes…”

“Are you trying to pry into the source of my information, officer? Here, my little friend here will tell you everything you need to know.”

Colonel Calandro pointed a handgun at the officer.

Colonel Lergen should probably be thankful for the sheer willpower of the man who received his message. Colonel Calandro appeared to have deep trust in Colonel Lergen’s phone call.

“Y-you must be joking, Colonel.”

“Yes, now make sure it stays a joke by doing your job. And I mean now, officer.”

Colonel Calandro was on the brink of shooting the man if he wasn’t going to comply. His stony face showed no hesitation, making the gravity of the situation clear to all in the room.

“They reached out to us at a time like this. Even if it is a bluff, we must act swiftly to determine how we will respond!”

Colonel Lergen was a General Staff officer. He wasn’t the type to call simply out of friendship.

Nor was there any suggestion that the man was an intelligence agent judging by their history together.

The problem was, why would someone like him make such an urgent call?

Every fiber of Colonel Calandro's being told him that he needed to act quickly. His suspicions had been right before when it came to the Empire's intent.

For Ildoa, which enjoyed a lasting peace, the colonel's ability to quickly make a decision and immediately kick into gear was highly appropriate.

It wasn't likely that anyone, even General Zettour, would've taken *the Lergen call* this seriously in the face of Ildoa's unprecedented moment of peace.

That being said, there was…a fatal misdirection in the warning that would be sent out that night.

Colonel Calandro's warning to his superiors would indeed spell out a *strange development coming from the Empire*.

In this regard, his warning was accurate. He was sure that something big was about to happen. Colonel Calandro believed that his superiors would analyze the report based on their available information. This was, undoubtedly, precisely what the Ildoan General Staff proceeded to do.

The intel analysts moved swiftly to gather any information they could find on recent developments in the Empire. Despite being summoned in the middle of the night, the agents moved with incredible efficiency. It didn't take them long to come up with their first hypothesis as to what the message could be alluding to.

That hypothesis, however, would have left any Imperial citizen confused were it to reach their ears. The buttons had been fastened in the wrong order from the first analysis.

"This is an emergency! There may be political strife occurring in the Empire…!"

"Message to our embassy in the imperial capital immediately! We need to ascertain what is going on over there…"

"We need information on their politicians and their government policy…!"

The warning was sent. The analysts were able to predict that there was an emergency unfolding as well.

The issue, however, was that people often made assessments based on their own values. They believed that others thought the same way they did.

The cultured Ildoans could only think in terms of how they

operated. Their highly refined minds were what would do the wise Ildoan analysts in.

Unfortunately for the analysts, they had forgotten that the Imperial politicians were no longer refined in the same way they were.

In other words, what was about to happen to their nation was entirely outside the realm of their wildest imaginations—because their neighbors often thought violence was the only answer. Thus, the Ildoan analysts would put all of their power into reevaluating the Empire's political playing field without even the slightest suspicion that it could be something else…

NOVEMBER 11, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, THE IMPERIAL ARMY GENERAL STAFF OFFICE

On the wall of a room in the General Staff Office hung a clock. All eyes watched as the hands slowly ticked their way around in a circle.

The room was filled to the brim with a mix of tranquility and unease.

The General Staff officers, dressed to the nines with their freshly starched uniforms and sporting their flashy aiguillettes, were restless as they watched every tick of the clock go by.

In contrast to his officers, General Zettour was as relaxed as could be.

The tension didn't seem to affect him. He leisurely smoked a cigar and even took out a book to read, as if he wasn't related to anything that was about to happen.

He wore a smile as he flipped through some pages.

As if consumed by the slapstick comedy he was reading, he would elegantly set his cigar down to hide his grin.

"The world is a stage, and its people are the actors. Oh, how the classics can be so interesting."

Taking notes on interesting anecdotes was a hobby of the general's. This definitely wasn't the time or place for hobbies, which meant it was his adjutant's—Lieutenant Colonel Uger's—job to ask for the general's undivided attention.

This was definitely one of the most difficult parts of being an adjutant. It was never easy to stop a superior when he was in the middle of enjoying himself. But, considering that the operation was about to begin…

"Sir… I'm sorry to interrupt you when you seem to be having a good time, but…"

"Yes, Colonel Uger? Do you want to read this book as well? I wouldn't mind lending it to you once I'm finished."

"No, sir… With all due respect, I…"

"You want to read it that bad? I didn't know you were such a fan of romance novels. Well, there is another I can recommend. One about a man who hates women and a woman who hates men falling in love."

Uger winced at his superior, and by the time he realized he was being teased, General Zettour had already readjusted the cigar in his mouth.

He seemed so free—the way he blew out a big puff of smoke. Due to his rank, Lieutenant Colonel Uger could do nothing more than wince at his superior's remark.

And naturally, the general did the exact same thing.

"You all are far too tense. Maintaining a level of focus is important, but you can't let yourself worry too much. We must trust those on the ground to carry out their duties."

"I feel as if this tension isn't something one can get used to."

"Don't let yourself get confused, Colonel. This is our first time attacking a neutral country, is it not?"

"That's true… You're right about this being the first time we've ever initiated hostilities against a neutral country."

Lieutenant Colonel Uger took out a handkerchief and wiped the sweat off his forehead.

He hadn't thought about it until the general brought it up, but it was true. The feeling of tension that came with *starting a war* was a first for everyone in the room. It was much more nerve-racking than the moments before any other operation.

There was a cold sweat running down Lieutenant Colonel Uger's back. He glanced over at the general…and he didn't know if he should be astonished or amazed at the sight of General Zettour with his nose plunged back in his book. He was troubled for a moment, but chalked up his superior's bravado as reliable.

That said, he ended up blurting out his thoughts to break the

silence that was taking a different toll on his nerves.

"We're set to start the battle on schedule. I only pray that it will end on schedule as well."

"Colonel Uger… I forgot you were still a human."

"Sir?"

The general showed Lieutenant Colonel Uger a grin.

"General Staff officers are relatives of the devil. This is especially true when we are making calculations."

Success and failure were both without error when they were the product of calculations. The General Staff officers needed to place the devil into various details, push the limits of human intellect, and pry their victory from the clutches of fate. Total war required them to be monsters.

"You wish to pray for our success? That is something a human would do. You can leave the praying to somebody who isn't an officer. There is a different path for us to take."

Most people would feel anxious as they watched the clock tick away. Nevertheless, Zettour was the lone preacher of war who could show his peers the way.

"Remember this."

The arrogant, intellectual monster that was a true officer was certain of their victory at this moment. Thoroughly calculated numbers never lied. He threw away the human part of him that made mistakes based on hope.

"Why would a General Staff officer ever lose to a regular person? Do you think I'm arrogant? You'd be right. A General Staff officer who has seized the initiative can see a plan through to the end without fail. Half of the battle is in the preparation."

He could accept that the fog of war would always be present and that there would always be resistance—this was to be embraced. It was also understandable that there would be a level of internal conflict when taking decisive actions. Provisions needed to be well-managed so that there would be no food shortages. These were all factored into creating a master plan.

A General Staff officer needed to demonstrate their capability not with their demeanor but with the results they produced. The cogs of the instrument of violence needed to be kept in the best shape as humanly possible. The regularly polished cogs were like gods in each of their own rights. Or perhaps it was in these cogs where the real devils resided. There was no room for a malfunction

in the war machine.

General Zettour spoke in a gentle voice to soothe his subordinate.

“There is no doubt the first strike will succeed.”

Lieutenant Colonel Uger was drawn in by the general’s words, which the general reciprocated by continuing his explanation in a kind tone.

“For you see…our Ildoan friends have only ever fought a war in their imaginations. They aren’t prepared for what a real battle entails.”

“Do you believe our surprise attack will be that effective?”

“We’re about to kick them out of their beds. I question whether or not there is a way we can lose. It surely isn’t as if our army is a house cat about to go up against a lion.”

The general spoke with great confidence. But what spoke even greater volumes than his confidence was the determination that could be seen burning in his eyes. They were thinned by his grin, but there wasn’t a hint of laughter in them.

Lieutenant Colonel Uger inadvertently gulped when he accidentally looked directly into them. He was already fully aware of his superior’s sheer capability—almost to a fault—but such prowess was only known in the context of operations. To think, the general was this ferocious in the realm of strategy as well.

In that moment, perhaps Lieutenant Colonel Uger had relaxed a bit too much. He showed a curious look of his own. Perhaps it was due to the unexpected circumstances at hand, or maybe it was because he had heard Deputy Director Zettour always had a plan B.

Whichever the case may have been, his mouth would open before he finished thinking his thought through.

“What will we do if this fails?”

Lieutenant Colonel Uger regretted the question immediately after asking it. It was a flippant thing to ask, considering the immense anxiety permeating throughout the room concerning a potential strategic setback. The lieutenant colonel stood straight up in attention, ready to apologize, when General Zettour motioned for him to relax.

The general closed the romantic comedy he had been reading… and rubbed his neck with his hand.

“It will be my head on the chopping block if we fail. Though that’s simply a matter of time in and of itself.”

“Sir?”

“It’s nothing,” General Zettour said as he shook his head before returning to his cigar. The serene look in his expression wasn’t something usually expected from a commanding officer in the moments immediately preceding an attack.

But this demeanor was natural for him, as any nervousness that came at such a time was something he had long gotten over.

“People all die eventually. The way I see it, we may as well spend what remains of our life fighting until the very end.”

The general then looked to the clock. It was the time he had decided on for the attack. He could never forget it, and even if he did, the mounting nervousness of the surrounding officers wouldn’t let him. The difference in their demeanors also served as a reminder that the majority of the aiguillette-clad officers in there were still human on the inside.

Genuine General Staff officers were hard to come by—it was an almost-saddening fact. This was also why, however, the Empire was in its current situation.

As this fact crossed his mind, a fleeting childishness welled up inside of General Zettour. He wondered if the clock on the wall was actually accurate. After all, it was nothing more than a random clock on the wall. For all they knew, it could be a few minutes off. He checked his watch, and sure enough, it appeared to align perfectly with the clock on the wall.

It was a perfect example of preestablished harmony. How unwarlike.

After all was said and done, though they were about to start a war, it was nothing more than a limited operation, a strategic military maneuver that was merely one part of the larger war front. It was wholly evident and as precious as could be.

The commanding officers on the field would likely compete for strategic tactfulness. As someone thrown into the confusion of the east, he could only be jealous.

That said, this time it was he who was starting things. He would pull the trigger, which meant that he was no longer in a place to make idle complaints.

When they attacked Ildoa, the Unified States would join the war. It would make things much more difficult. He knew this much. Even when considering this, his calculations dictated that the attack was necessary… He knew he couldn’t put off the decision much

longer, which was precisely why, at least at that moment, he wanted to fight a limited war as a strategist.

Or…what may become his first and last war for glory. It would soon be time to start the final battles of this war.

He took one last puff of his cigar before fixing his posture. It was time. As soon as the clock struck the planned time, General Zettour muttered to the rest of the room:

"It's time for what should be an entertaining battle. Let's get started."

Meanwhile, the hands of the clock hit the same predetermined time elsewhere.

The commander of the Salamander Kampfgruppe stationed on the Ildoan border, Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff, shares simple instructions with her troops.

"My comrades! I have wonderful news!"

Tanya makes her passion apparent as she bears in mind that this is the first bit of good news since the formation of the Salamander Kampfgruppe. It's always a thrilling thing for operations and strategy to come together.

"We will be taking the initiative on this attack!"

An attack. A full-on, all-out attack. A clear one at that. No more defensive mobility warfare, delayed engagements, or waiting on their enemies to make a counterattack.

Their plan is to invade the enemy—plain and simple. It is stressful for a service worker to sit and wait for complaints to process to come their way, and anyone has the dream of smacking an uppity customer upside the head at least once in their life. To actually be allowed to do so would surely make for stress-free work.

"We are free to act as we wish this time! We no longer have to tap dance around our enemies! This mission should be amply easier than what we're used to dealing with!"

Attacking Ildoa certainly isn't a good thing. Everyone knows that we shouldn't do it. Tanya knows for sure that this operation is hardly clever, but she can't say it out loud. Either way, from a commander's perspective, this should be an extremely easy operation.

"It's time for a fun battle for once. I want you to enjoy yourselves, comrades."

Tanya folds her hands behind her back and emboldens her troops with a grin.

This is how the ancient Romans used to do it. It's a traditional and reliable doctrine, proven repeatedly in combat, to inspire your troops' fighting spirit by logically explaining their strengths.

A fighting spirit without a foundation in physics is worthless. But a spirit built upon something true isn't something that can be taken lightly. Tanya needs each and every one of her soldiers to perform to the best of their abilities. It is only natural for a managerial staffer to invigorate her subordinates before they get to work on the ground.

This is why after her speech, Tanya seeks out the leader of each branch of her Kampfgruppe. She starts with the man leading the mechanized units.

"Captain Ahrens. Our speed is everything in this battle. Make sure you are where you need to be at every step of the operation."

"We'll aim to break through the enemy line."

"You'll aim to do it? Are you shitting me, man?"

Tanya sighs before correcting her subordinate. We can't have them misunderstand something this crucial.

"Breaking through their line isn't a goal you should *strive* for. It's something you are responsible for achieving. You *will* break through their line. At all costs, no matter what."

Time will be of the essence in their battle against Ildoa. The operation's success relies on this man's troops keeping up with the clock. Time is the resource the operation lacks most. There is minimal room for error in this regard.

I wonder how many examples there are in history where a plan allowed for this little redundancy?

I doubt there were none. But, out of the few there were, how many actually managed to pull out a victory? Shockingly enough, it falls on Tanya's shoulders to make sure that this operation goes down as one of the few that does succeed.

Sending empty words of encouragement and expecting your subordinates to perform is something a useless superior does! They are the worst cut of manager, the type that ignores reality and still demands results.

In more regular times, Tanya would snap at a superior who tried to attempt this. But things are different this time.

"I am confident in your ability as an expert to successfully carry out your part of the mission. There is, however, no need for you to pray for our victory. For you see, the devil is in the details in this one."

The only challenge laid out on the table before them is penetrating the enemy line. Conversely, any other variables and factors that play a role in our success are nigh nonexistent.

Let's take the dumb example of a defeat due to our reinforcements lagging behind. Even the mere thought is utter nonsense. We'll have some of our best units standing by behind us, prepared to charge. The top has made all the necessary arrangements for our success. The vanguard just needs to keep to its schedule.

Whether or not the reinforcements lag behind and cause the operation to fail…isn't Tanya's responsibility. And this is a good thing! She's exempt from watching over the collective charge.

"The success of this operation rides on your performances. Now, our Kampfgruppe has proven effective time and time again when penetrating even the Federation troops."

With this in mind, Tanya speaks with great joy:

"We will have control of the skies, under which you will lead the charge on the ground. All you must do is what you always do… That is, unless one of you wants to argue that the Ildoan Army poses more of a threat than the Federation's and will be too much for our regular tactics. Surely there isn't someone so stupid in our ranks."

Captain Ahrens appears to understand her as he gives a slight nod. And why wouldn't he? My logic is flawless. A good citizen needs to carry out their duty with integrity.

"What we will enact today is a beautifully executed division of labor, comrades."

The Kampfgruppe will open up the path for their soldiers to penetrate and conquer the country. A classical, traditional approach that is also relatively modern.

War's truths should be practiced with extreme fidelity. It's always good to bear in mind the basics.

"If we're backed by solid reinforcements, it should seal the deal. It's the art of war. Comrades, let us show the Ildoans the culmination of our hard work in the east."

The classic economist Ricardo would appreciate this beautiful separation of tasks. Some jest that the simplification of work has removed joy from labor…but it is fine for war to be simple. Tanya will never be able to appreciate the joys of war. That said, I'm also not so arrogant as to interject my position onto others… I am a

pacifist, after all.

Tanya waves her hands and calls out to the officer watching from the side.

“First Lieutenant Tospan. I won’t order you to die. But I want you to have your soldiers march like their lives depend on it. Move forward with all your might.”

“In other words, this will be easier than what we do in the east!”

“I’m glad you’re clever enough to understand!”

She cheerfully converses with the commander of the foot soldiers and hopes for a skillful execution of their duties.

The officer, who is willing to fight to the death, will probably continue his charge until the orders come for him to stop.

The next person Tanya approaches is the officer overseeing the artillery. He has a grim expression about him.

Unlike the other officers, he’s not trying to hide his dejection going into this next battle.

And who could blame him? After all, his job is to drag the army’s cannons along the charge to keep up with everyone else in a battle of maneuver warfare. And these cannons are massive. To supply cover-fire in maneuver warfare when invading enemy territories is one of the most labor-intensive tasks in the army. He and his troops are more likely to be killed by their workloads than by a stray bullet.

Fortunately for him, there is good news.

“Captain Meybert, unfortunately, I don’t think you will be seeing much action for this operation. Friendly troops will be taking care of the artillery for our Kampfgruppe this time.”

“The artillery division is here?”

Captain Meybert looks up with hope in his eyes. The man, however, is a veteran—he’s been betrayed by hope enough times to know not to trust it. This hesitation of his is likely a learned disillusionment. It’s a truly saddening sight to see. This time, though, he could believe Tanya. The Artillery Division—in other words, the only true god worth praising—is there watching over them. The General Staff…or perhaps more aptly, General Zettour, has really pulled through for them this time.

“We have a truly benevolent god watching over us for this offensive. He is the benevolent deity of slinging missiles.”

Their artillery will be where they need it, when they need it.

“S-so, what you mean to say is…?”

“A barrage of missile fire is only a quick phone call away. We’ve been given priority for their usage, even a field general would be jealous.”

“I’d be more than willing to sell my soul to this god you speak of if all that is true.”

Tanya finds his joke quite funny but keeps her laugh to herself upon seeing the look on the man’s face. For a logical liberal like myself, I can’t quite understand how he speaks in such definite terms. Nevertheless, it’s clear that the man is quite serious. The colorlessness in his eyes and voice makes this abundantly clear.

“I wouldn’t lie to you. We’ll have a dense curtain of shiny missiles assigned to support our thrust. They even sent self-propelled artillery and trucks to make sure everything could keep up.”

Despite the scarcity of such resources in our nation, clever planning and effort made it possible to procure what we needed for this operation. Thanks to his time as an operations manager and his experience in the east, General Zettour’s expertise as a leader has achieved masterful heights. He knows where he needs his resources to be and gets them there, and executes his logistics with incredible leadership.

It almost makes Tanya regret her decision to seek out a new job. Had he been in charge when this war started…

I’m sure most workers feel this regret when they find better management on the way out.

The backing of her outstanding superior makes it possible for Tanya to give Captain Meybert her guarantee with a big grin.

“The operation can be done if all you have to do is haul the equipment, right?”

“Along the roads? That should be easy enough…”

“In exchange for that, just make sure you keep strictly to the schedule. Do you copy?”

Captain Meybert’s firm nod suggests this didn’t even need to be said. I’m sure he’s the type who’d rather load himself into an artillery and launch himself to where he needs to be rather than be late. I know it’s a silly analogy, but honestly, I wouldn’t put it past him. That’s just how elated this man is by the news and maddened he is from the war. A staff that enjoys doing their job always performs better than those who dislike it. This is just what it is to be

human. As much as Tanya dislikes war, having a band of hardworking fellows who will gladly go out and fight for her is a nice thing.

The last officer she visits is none other than her faithful first officer.

“Now, Major Weiss. We’ll be splitting the mage battalion into two. You’ll be defending our main troops. I’m sorry, but you’ll have to bear most of the burden on the front with Grantz.”

“Understood. And at which crucial point will you be stationed, Colonel?”

“Me? I will be pushing you around from behind. Does that make you jealous?”

Tanya shows an arrogant attitude, but she knows that her subordinates aren’t so foolish as to be tricked by her vague allusions.

Surely enough, Major Weiss makes his comprehension apparent with a vigorous nod.

“I am. Being on tactical support duty must be nice.”

“That is correct. I’ll be working directly with the general. My only concern is how jealous you all may get.”

Tanya is to be a pawn that is sent where she’s needed. She figures that, at the very least, she will get extra time to rest until she is deployed. But…where and what she is needed for depends wholly on who will need her.

First Lieutenant Grantz can’t hide his wide-eyed disbelief.

“For General Zettour…?”

“What’s this, First Lieutenant Grantz? Are you interested in working with the general again? If you’d like, I could have your company fight alongside mine.”

“Allow us to remain where we are! Somebody more suitable than us underlings should deal with those higher up!”

This is an exemplary answer. First Lieutenant Grantz shakes his head at what may just be the maximum velocity humanly achievable to show he’d rather not deal with the general. To say it isn’t a bit overexaggerated would be a lie. Feeling a tinge of suspicion, Tanya decides to question the first lieutenant’s reaction.

“Come on, now. There’s no need to hold yourself back. It’s completely understandable that a first lieutenant from the military academy would have an interest in moving up in the ranks. I certainly wouldn’t want to hold any of my soldiers back.”

“I appreciate your kindness, but you really needn’t mind me or my career!”

“Have you no interest in building a relationship with the general? I suggest you reconsider the value of a strong relationship with him.”

The Imperial Army may be a strict meritocracy void of any blatant favoritism, but a superior’s backing is still a powerful thing. Without General Zettour’s good word, for example, Tanya would never be where she is despite being the youngest person present.

Her objective self-awareness lets Tanya know that she is blessed with good superiors in this way.

“I place great value on your ability, First Lieutenant Grantz. I know you could do good work for the general if given the opportunity.”

One must always be sincere with the handling of another’s career. Even if the intended purpose for her subordinates is to be meat shields on the battlefield, they are still individuals. With Tanya being the earnest person she is, she would never do something so shameful as to keep them down, career-wise.

“Is there anything I could do as your superior? I would gladly write you a letter of recommendation.”

“Please have mercy! I don’t know if the general will send me into the enemy’s artillery fire or throw me at their panzer units—whichever it is, one thing is for sure, his assignments are always a one-way trip to steel and hellfire!”

“What?”

He seems so desperate—as if a million Federation snipers are watching his every move. First Lieutenant Grantz rejects Tanya’s offer with a stern face and loud voice.

“I simply wish to leave it to those fit for greatness to become great!”

Being the rational civilian she is, Tanya can’t understand why warmongers loudly declare their hatred for working in the rear. That said, she is aware that people who think this way exist. If I’m to add anything to this, it is that Tanya also accepts that people have different values and has the good sense not to force her own sensibilities onto them. She is confident that this is part of what makes her a good individual.

Thus she understood his sentiment and, to show him this, waved her hand with a grimace.

“Did you hear that, first officer? The youth these days appear to lack ambition.”

Shouldn’t humans be allowed to be more honest with their desires? With this fundamental question in her mind, Tanya would soon discover that his misunderstanding derives from his narrow perspective.

“I’ve seen how General Zettour has used you on the battlefield. Regretfully, I wish to keep myself out of that position if possible.”

Her first officer’s words reach her brain, and she ruminates over them for a moment.

“Oh?”

Tanya crosses her arms and thinks… *He’s right; I certainly haven’t had it easy.*

Though General Zettour has propped Tanya up, he has yet to properly compensate her for her work. If her salary doesn’t jump up to match her responsibilities, then she can’t justify her current workload. Her logical, younger soldiers know only to do the amount of work they are paid to do. It makes sense that they wouldn’t go and make more work for themselves.

“You have a point… Now that you mention it, I have been put through the wringer.”

This is why she is trying to change jobs, after all. Thinking back on it, it is fairly simple. The unimaginable psychology of this generation not wishing to advance their career becomes more palatable when looked at through this lens of cost-effectiveness. The cost of societal status is what it takes to maintain such prestige.

That must be it.

With this realization confirming once more the greatness of the market, Tanya is enveloped in an unwavering sense of relief.

“Hearing you say that tells me I trained my subordinates to have clear-eyed principles. I extend my thanks to you, First Lieutenant Grantz.”

With these words, what tension there is in the room quickly dissipates. With boisterous laughter filling the air, I take pride in the job I have done in taking everyone’s minds off the upcoming battle.

Though, as soon as the tension leaves my first officer’s shoulders, he quickly brings the topic back to work.

“I do question, though, if this is a proper allocation of our manpower. I don’t mean to suggest his troops are supplementary,

but to have First Lieutenant Wüstemann held back as reserves…"

My first officer so aptly points out that there is much to be concerned about having the more inexperienced units hang back to act as emergency support. The more difficult an emergency, the harder it will be for them to execute the necessary support effectively. Though his concern isn't unwarranted, it comes down to a balancing act.

"It's a bit complicated, but reserves are often used as gap pluggers in maneuver warfare. We certainly can't afford to pull our strongest units off the front."

Though it is vital to prepare for emergencies, the mission itself will require the proper personnel to be carried out effectively in the first place. The placement of competent soldiers is a difficult decision that befalls a division thin on human resources. Using what we have effectively means accepting a certain level of risk and compromise.

"We'll keep everyone where they are. You and First Lieutenant Grantz will lead the charge, and First Lieutenant Wüstemann and I will fluff our pillows in the rear."

I'm going to get the shut-eye I deserve. Tanya grins at her subordinates…though she is fully aware that it isn't an ideal position to be in. First Lieutenant Serebryakov, who also knows of the difficulties of rapid reactions to a hot battlefield, makes no effort to hide a massive sigh.

"And we will inevitably wake up at the first sound of an alarm…"

The grimness in her tone comes from experience. What speaks more to this point is the almost-commendable level of defeat in her expression. Her adjutant's overt wincing shows that she definitely doesn't want to do this.

"It sounds like you know your stuff, adjutant. It is exactly like the Rhine."

"Yes, Colonel… I'm not looking forward to working twenty-four seven.

"I know, I know. I'm not in high spirits about it, either."

One thing a superior should never do is expose her quibbles to her subordinates. However, I must say that I agree wholeheartedly with First Lieutenant Serebryakov's complaints.

Were we on regular scramble duty, we could take turns taking time off. But as the entire company will be on watch twenty-four

seven, it doesn't matter if we are sleeping, eating, or bathing—we will have to answer the alarm at the drop of a hat. There will be no time for us to rest.

Even worse is the fact that there aren't enough reserve troops to support this battle. Worst-case scenario, we may have to deploy daily for twenty-four hours at a time—so always.

"Well, anyway, Major Weiss. You make sure to charge relentlessly, no matter what happens. I'm expecting you to clear out the enemy nice and quickly."

"Yes, Lieutenant Colonel! I plan on making sure you get the beauty sleep you need!"

"I expect nothing less from you. The last thing you want is for me to have to fly out and kick you in the rear to get you moving."

"I'm not the same as I was in Dacia. You can count on me."

The historians kept detailed records of how things started. The first attack was made at the exact same time as their declaration of war. In this regard, the Imperial Foreign Office, who had been resting on their laurels up until then, spared no effort. Without a second of delay, they delivered their declaration of war to the Ildoan embassy in the Empire.

By the time the stunned Ildoan ambassadors snapped out of their stupor and sought out their Imperial counterparts for confirmation on the situation, missiles were already laying into their nation's border, lighting up the Ildoan morning sky.

The aerial assault also started around the same time. With each division double-checking to ensure there were no orders to hold, they flew over the Ildoan border and attacked their respective targets.

General Zettour's ability to expertly focus an aerial assault had been ingrained into him in the east, and he was thorough with his practice.

He'd wagered everything on the first all-out attack. Advancing the aerodrome up to the front line was only the beginning. In addition to assembling parts, ammunition, and fuel, the army assembled maintenance personnel from all over the Empire—even the education department—to maximize their sorties.

To make repeated sorties possible, the air traffic controllers

who had experienced aggressive *air warfare* during the Western Air Battle were purposely deployed instead of the usual personnel who only handled interceptions.

All of these arrangements were made to ensure control over the sky. The efforts to secure a localized advantage in Ildoa at the expense of the education division, the western industrial zone's air defense, and air support over the entire eastern defensive line and the imperial capital would pay off.

The boots on the ground advanced with the air fleet controlling the skies.

With an unprecedented level of aerial supremacy for the modern Imperial Army, they could even send in their railway guns to pulverize the Ildoan line of defense.

Steel and blood rocked the Ildoan territory like a shock wave that quickly made its way to the nation's political apparatus. Anyone affected by the war was quickly thrown into a panic, and before they knew it, the collective panic amassed into a whirlwind of turmoil.

The same went for Colonel Calandro, who had been waiting all night for more information to come from either the Empire or his own nation's border control. He was the one who sounded the alarm, after all. His intention was to prepare for whatever was to come, so he wasn't surprised when a panicked officer came stumbling into his office.

"C-C-Colonel!"

The hysterical officer was a young first lieutenant. The way he tripped over himself as he rushed into the room alerted Colonel Calandro to the severity of the situation.

Colonel Calandro took a deep breath and, prepared for whatever conspiracy was afoot, questioned the officer with a firm tone.

"Is it a coup d'état? Or is the government suppressing its people? A political purge? It doesn't matter what it is. Just tell me what you know!"

"Th-th-the Empire, they…"

"The Empire?"

He assumed this meant something had happened in the Empire. Though the man's hesitation was unsettling, he waited for him to continue.

"They're on the move! They've mobilized!"

Colonel Calandro didn't quite follow what his subordinate was trying to convey.

"They're coming!"

His speech didn't make sense. Whatever the officer was trying to say, he was too flustered to communicate it. The man was acting completely hysterical, and this young officer, in particular, wasn't the type to lose his composure… He was, after all, an officer entrusted with passing along messages from command. What happened to his usual composure? What was wrong with him?

"First Lieutenant, take a deep breath. What do you mean by *the Empire is on the move*?"

"Th-th-the Empire, the Empire! They've begun! Their attack! They've declared war!"

"Come again?"

What was the man trying to say? The colonel picked up on keywords that soon sunk in. He could guess what the man was trying to say, but unable to process it, he just parroted the man's words back to him.

"They've…declared war…? Absurd! They declared war…?!"

The colonel couldn't finish his sentence with *on us*—he didn't have the time. He quickly turned around, leaving the officer behind as he began to run. Rushing right through the panicked and confused military camp, he ran directly to main control, where he soon met his peers.

They all had the same unvoiced opinion on their expressionless faces. Their sentiment: *How could this be?*

Far off across the country, Ildoa's capital was hit by the same shock waves. The distance from the defensive line did not make the tremors feel any less powerful. In fact, it was fair to say the shock waves had grown even stronger by the time they reached the capital.

Spittle flew through the air as each of the high-ranking officers screamed at each other.

"Why would the Empire do this?!"

It wasn't dreaming. It wasn't some nightmare they could wake up from by a pinch of the cheek. That wouldn't stop a few of them from trying, though. The pain that ran through their cheeks told them that this was reality, and that the reality they thought they knew wasn't dictated by the same logic they lived by.

Perhaps if they played a more active role in the war, they

would've had a better perspective. The logic the Imperial General Staff Office adhered to was different than Ildoa's. It was a bestial and monstrous perspective that led to rational action.

How sad—or fortunate, as it may be—that the Ildoans never fully understood the concept of total war. Even their army thought of war as an exception and peace as the norm.

The military and diplomatic consensus of the Royal Ildoan Army was to maximize their own gains under the flag of neutrality and staying out of the war. They believed this was the best way they could maintain good relations with all of their neighboring countries. For countries warring with the Empire, this stance was a victory in and of itself as it created room for a wedge to be placed in the Ildoa-Empire Alliance.

They could also act as a mediator for the Empire and the rest of the world. Even if it was nothing more than a formality, it was a proper diplomatic route for the Empire. For the Empire, which had long endured an all-out war, Ildoa could guide them to the end of hostilities it so desired. The Ildoans could send the Empire strategic resources in secret and create helpful, though limited, supply lines for the country.

The nation's armed neutrality alliance with the Unified States had been signed after the end of the war came into view. This rare strategic foothold Ildoa created for its neutrality seemed inviolable, and its leaders figured they could earn favor from both sides. Even if they failed to mediate, it wouldn't have been damaging to their own nation. Any interests they lost out on could slowly be reclaimed from the Empire after the war. Moreover, there still should have been plenty of room for new gains to be made with other countries that sought alliances with Ildoa.

For the most part, Ildoa should have been able to accomplish all of this without gambling their lives by entering the war. They were, after all, an invaluable pipeline for countries on both sides to reach out to each other through. There wasn't a single nation that harbored ill will toward Ildoa, certainly not to the extent they would risk losing the diplomatic channel it provided. If any country were to go on the offensive between Ildoa and the Empire, it surely would have been Ildoa. Even then, this decision was only to be made when the Empire's defeat was clearly on the horizon, and their participation in the war would be in name only. The nation's border was never supposed to see any action from this war.

The Ildoans thought this, at least. It was the assumption at the time. Though, the shell-shocked generals now knew that this was naive.

The news that the Imperial Army had crossed their border hit the Ildoan Army officials like a bolt out of the blue.

Though dumbfounded by the incomprehensible situation…this, in a way, meant that they would share something new with their old ally: the reality of total war.

They were now both companions in this damned world of war.

Under the mantra of necessity, the Empire welcomed their neighbor to this new world with a brilliant display of fanfare that lit up their border.

Recorded history, on occasion, tells the tale of unintended coincidences bringing about unforeseen amendments to the narrative at the time. What would come to be known as the *fight for the highway* was one of these occasions.

Students who would go on to learn about this strange military achievement would have as hard a time understanding the event as their teachers did explaining it. To sum it up shortly, it could be described as an unexpected example of leadership. This, of course, would reference the charge led by Colonel Lergen and the Eighth Panzer Regiment.

Nobody anticipated that something like this would happen. After all, General Zettour wanted aerial superiority to be achieved before the charge, the results of which were the image of perfection. After the panzer units broke through the border defenses at a single point, the plan's second phase immediately followed: to contain the Ildoan garrisons.

The fact of the matter was, with most of the enemy forces positioned quite a distance away from the border, the tank unit could advance easily. The tanks moved quickly through the defenseless area, and everything was going according to the Empire's plan.

Therefore, it was only natural that even the great General Zettour assumed the Eighth Panzer Regiment would move forward according to schedule. No matter how flawless the plan was, however, people were never without flaws.

Even with the best aerial support an army could ask for, it was impossible to completely protect the forces on the ground from enemy planes. The first part of the coincidence started with the smoothness of the Eighth Panzer Regiment's advance. The regiment would break through the border and keep pushing through the nation according to plan. Lieutenant General Jörg's forces advanced with great speed, even when compared to other friendly troops. The lieutenant general was crammed into a tank with the other commanding officers, who all took the initiative to lead the charge. Morale was high among both him and his officers.

The speed of the advance had Colonel Lergen—who, as the chief of staff, acted as the intermediary between Lieutenant General Jörg and each of his units—at the edge of his seat. They were moving as fast as they could without breaking formation.

Just when they reached their maximum velocity, the enemy showed themselves in the skies above.

"Enemy air!"

Colonel Lergen knew what he needed to do when the warning was shouted through his radio.

"Abandon all vehicles! Get off the road!"

The colonel was mid-leap out of the communications vehicle as he gave these orders. Though the trucks were driving at a speed the foot soldiers could keep up with, the force with which he hit the ground served as a good reminder of the strength of gravity. Though the impact was painful, it didn't stop him from moving.

His body had learned the tremendous threat an aerial attack could pose. It was something anyone fighting in the war would inevitably learn, whether they liked it or not. In any case, the open roads posed the greatest risk. Whether the enemy bandits were mages or planes, anything out in the open would make for a perfect target.

"Take cover! Get off the roads! Move, move, move!"

While the driver did what he could to conceal his vehicle, Colonel Lergen continued to yell for his men to take cover.

Altitude alone was a dangerous weapon in itself. So much so that the colonel and his men were reduced to hiding in the mud! Pressing his men to hurry, he threw away concern for their formation as he demanded his men find cover.

"Spread out and get down! Don't bunch up!"

The most they could do was find modest cover and protection.

Even the most basic machine guns mounted on enemy planes were more than enough to tear a person apart. The soldiers got down and hid, then prayed that any bullets wouldn't find them.

What was most infuriating for the Imperial forces about find themselves under enemy fire was that the encounter was a complete and utter coincidence.

The planes were a rogue unit that, upon learning they were being invaded, made the executive decision to take flight in an attempt to ascertain the situation. They figured it was better than sitting on their hands and waiting for their planes to be destroyed at the airfields without ever taking off.

The rogue commander's quick decision-making resulted in them evading the risk of crossing paths with the Imperial planes that would soon destroy their aircraft and runways. Without even knowing how lucky they were, the planes flew north, intent on conducting reconnaissance.

This was when they saw a vanguard of mechanized infantry making their way down the highway. Upon their discovery, the first natural course of action was for the pilots to try and send an urgent report to the Ildoan Army. The poor reception, however, made the decision for them.

Though with a moment's hesitation, the pilots who had initially set out on conducting reconnaissance decided to turn around. If that was all that happened, the Imperial soldiers would've finished the encounter with the only casualties their muddy uniforms.

The Ildoan soldiers, however, hadn't come empty-handed—and they would unleash their payload. Their planes were equipped with Ildoan-made eighty-kilo bombs, Commonwealth-made air-to-surface rockets, and auto cannons made using global licenses.

For the Ildoan soldiers, the use of these weapons essentially amounted to test fire.

They went straight for the head of the garrison and dropped their ordinance before heading back to their base. The scope of the attack made it clear that it was a minor encounter. For the panzer units on the receiving end of the blast, it was, at most, a decent nuisance—nothing more than suppressive fire, with only a few tanks near the front lost.

War, however, was full of unpredictable chaos.

The majority of the Imperial officers and soldiers solemnly lifted their heads from the mud to watch the planes return, only to

discover that their operation, which had been so smooth up until a moment ago, had quickly devolved into disarray.

"The commander has been killed!"

Realizing what had happened, the Eighth Panzer Regiment officers rushed to the front of the vanguard to find Commander Jörg and most of the other staff officers he had been riding with in the armored truck completely blown apart. It was a glaring example of the main problem with commanding officers leading charges.

With Colonel Lergen acting as the commander's intermediary, he had to accept that he was now the next highest-ranking officer left after the perplexing random encounter.

He used the communications vehicle, which had been left unscathed, to contact each of the other divisions, and it confirmed he was indeed the highest-ranking officer on the field.

The senior officers who had been riding with Lieutenant General Jörg all jumped up two ranks. Sadly, the only officers left were himself and a young major. This sparse lineup almost had him thinking of borrowing some commanders from the regiment or battalion.

"It appears only you and I are left, Major Joachim."

"…What are your orders, Colonel Lergen?"

The major's worried expression was both tragic and brave.

Hm. Colonel Lergen showed a wry smile.

I know I'm young for a colonel, but just how many years have passed since Major Joachim graduated from the military academy?

The major was practically a child, barely old enough to be a captain. This made the colonel realize that he himself was one of the older members of the current army. It also made the colonel even more aware of the war they had been fighting for far too long.

"…I'll exercise the right to command. Lord almighty, to think a mere colonel would have to command an entire division."

He let a sigh escape before alerting the rest of the division that he would be taking over from the communications vehicle. Fortunately, the attack hadn't done too much damage to their equipment or ability to send out orders.

The issue was who would be giving the orders.

Colonel Lergen laid out a map to discuss their next course of action but was soon disappointed to learn that the major didn't have much advice to offer.

"We still have aerial superiority to a certain extent, but it's

hardly perfect. I think it may be too risky for us to continue our attack in broad daylight."

"What are you suggesting?"

"I think we should wait for the cover of night before advancing further."

A dubious Colonel Lergen looked to see if the major was joking, but was met by a deadpan, stern gaze. Apparently, he was being serious. He knew what the major was trying to say, of course. Birds of prey slept during the night. Therefore, it wasn't as if the young major's suggestion was without logic. With time being of the essence, however, it was out of the question. Colonel Lergen showed a grim expression as he quietly shook his head.

"We won't make it on time if we wait until nightfall."

The regiment would be better off pushing forward during the day than wasting its precious time watching the clock. Yes, it would be risky, but that was how little they could afford to lose any more time. It was imperative that their charge be successful.

This was the southern highway that Ildoa was so proud of. Though not without the occasional car or horse showing up every now and then, compared to the quagmire in the east, there was nothing standing between them and their target. Not only this, but the enemy had yet to set up a defensive line. Though the time they could use this road was limited, it was a direct path to the Ildoan capital just sitting there, waiting for them to use it.

"We're in a race against the clock. We can't give the enemy the time they need to react."

"But, what if there's another—"

"Major Joachim, if we stop now, General Jörg's death will have been for nothing."

As a result of their ambush being effective, any enemy attacks were still sporadic.

The division was backed by aerial superiority and strong reinforcements following them. He only had to close his eyes to remember the difficulties he suffered in the east, and a *way* presented itself.

As long as they could continue their charge, they could break through the enemy line, for now.

Any time given to the enemy was time for them to react. A wall could easily be erected at any given moment. They would be sent back to the drawing board if they didn't complete their great leap

forward before the enemy could create a defensive line.

"This is why General Zettour was such a stickler about timing…"

It was the same reason Lieutenant General Jörg was obsessed with spearheading the charge—he knew the importance of speed for this operation. The colonel couldn't in his right mind succeed the man only to throw away what he strived for.

With a sigh, Colonel Lergen reached for the paper tobacco that had been crushed when he jumped out of the truck only moments earlier. He smoked a smooshed cigarette while taking a good look at the map. Judging by the enemy's movements, it was clear what they had to do.

So long as they pushed forward, there was a path for them. The point they sought to breach was still wide open. But if they remained idle? It could close at any given moment.

So they needed to seize this opportunity.

They continued their charge using the predetermined path. It was a difficult decision to make with their exact location having reached enemy hands.

"Major Joachim, I bet you would feel more comfortable if we had an umbrella over our heads, wouldn't you?"

"If they can cover the skies above us, it would certainly be nice…"

If they were going to have to stop every time a plane sporadically crossed their path, Colonel Lergen figured it could have a serious impact on their speed. He wanted someone covering the skies directly above them.

The issue was that their aerial forces were already on a strict rotation in order to keep the bulk of the enemy planes at bay. If things were moving at even 80 percent according to plan, then they didn't have any manpower left to cover them.

General Zettour's plan was a finely tuned masterpiece. He undoubtedly trimmed all of the fat from his orchestra so it could play his battle song. His war machine was moving with all its parts in perfect unison. There was, however, someone the colonel knew he could call. Someone who could be considered a *spare part*.

Knowledge was and always will be power.

"I suppose I must recognize the power of friendship."

Connections needed to be used where connections were had. As Colonel Lergen walked next to a communications officer, he flashed

a slight grin. The young General Staff officer who followed the new commander gave him a look of concern.

The colonel could understand his doubts about the vanguard, and taking all risks into consideration was an important thing. Nevertheless, Major Joachim was a proper field officer. He couldn't allow himself to show any anxiety to the officers and soldiers around him.

Upon picking up on the young officer's deficiencies, the colonel decided to offer him words to calm him.

"I'm going to send a request for backup. I'm thinking two mage companies should be more than enough for the job. What do you think?"

"Where are you going to find two companies' worth of mages?"

"I can't have you doubting me like this. When you've been a General Staff officer as long as I have, you learn about a reserve division or two that's always ready for action."

"My apologies, Colonel. Thank you, for everything…"

I should correct myself, Colonel Lergen grumbled to himself internally. *Major Joachim is absolutely stricken with anxiety. What exactly is there to worry about, though? Given how simple a battle this is, and how clear our mission is…what exactly is there to get so worked up about…? I can almost feel my neck wanting to tilt my head in bewilderment.*

"…Now that I think about it, the girl I'm about to call often cocks her head to the side, too."

His sudden realization was either a great discovery or a progression in his understanding of the girl. It wasn't the first time Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff popped up in his mind that day. Though he was reluctant to call for her, one mustn't let their trump cards go to waste.

"Give me your radio."

As soon as he took the transceiver from the communications officer, Colonel Lergen sent out a long-distance message. He definitely didn't want to send a cipherless message… He thought for a moment about what he could do.

"If I'm going to send this with a cipher, I need to figure something out."

Though, it was Degurechaff he was dealing with. An officer who could be trusted was a truly wonderful thing.

"Lead Kampfgruppe to Assistant Commander, requesting

deployment."

While the major likely wouldn't comprehend this message, it was more than enough. He decided to use this time to order a short break for the regiment.

The regiment was just finishing up clearing off the roads and collecting the remains of those who passed in the attack when Colonel Lergen saw a surprised Major Joachim running up to him.

"Th-there's a report for you, sir! The mage troops are here! Two companies from the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion have come to support us! They said they could begin covering us immediately!"

"Is that right? Let's make good use of them."

"I'm sorry, but I have to ask. How did you get them to come here?"

With reverence in the major's eyes, he stared at Colonel Lergen. The colonel nonchalantly hit him with a missile of his own.

"I borrowed them from General Zettour's pocket."

"I can't believe he would lend them to you."

"He did so in secret."

It was hard to describe the blank look on the major's face upon hearing this. Perhaps this was the reason seniors tended to pick on fresh blood: to see such a face. It was the duty of the seniors to train the heedless young officers…and it also served as a breath of fresh air, so the colonel would oblige Major Joachim's blockheadedness with kindness.

Although, unfortunately for them both, after surviving through this war since the battle in the north, Colonel Lergen was about as senior as they came.

An officer this young was about to fight under a fill-in division commander who wasn't much older. Up until only recently, such a combination would be inconceivable.

"I'm fairly close with their commander."

In that regard, that child in the sky is also considered an adult. No, age-wise she's still a young child. I suppose she should be a schoolgirl… though, there's a lot that Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff lacks when it comes to being an amiable young girl.

With that, Colonel Lergen put the brakes on his easily sidetracked mind. He took a few steps forward and found himself looking at the Ildoan sky. It was as blue as ever, but something about its color made him doubt his sanity. The colonel was then hit

with a sudden sense of vertigo. For just a moment, he was overwhelmed by his physical fatigue and the mental stress that came with the heavy responsibility.

I mean, it's not a toy poodle we're dealing with here. I've called for a hunting dog…

"Colonel?"

"Whoops, it seems I'm a bit more tired than I assumed."

"I-is this going to be a problem…? I mean, y-you're using the General Staff Office's reserves without permission, right?"

The young officer's words of concern were a sign to the colonel that he was in bad shape. It was more important for a commander to stand with proper posture when he was tired than when he wasn't. He loosened up his shoulders and smiled as if there was nothing wrong.

Aware of the officers and soldiers around him, he made it clear what he was thinking.

"There are no rules against requesting backup, now, are there? With that out of the way…"

Colonel Lergen paused for a moment to attract the attention of those around him. Though he personally had never been a conductor for an orchestra before, he wondered if this was what it was like for them before a big concert.

Shooing away the fleeting thought that crossed his mind, Colonel Lergen declared his orders with a resolute tone.

"We're going to advance!"

Follow me to victory.

He showed his soldiers a clear and simple beacon for hope. A commander needed to show that he was aware of his circumstances at all times. This was especially true when said commander had inherited his command temporarily.

Without a strong network of trust built between him and the soldiers, he needed to act in a way that kept them from losing hope. Even if he was an officer whose work was primarily internal, he was a General Staff officer nevertheless. He was a type of monstrosity that had some of the most experience as a part of the war apparatus in the Empire, in its military, and in the world. Even if he was a good individual, a General Staff officer was nothing more than a cog in the machine—and a great one at that.

The greater the cog, the greater they expected those around them to operate as well.

“Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff, please do as you always do. We need you to open up a path for us, keep our skies safe, and if you can, guide the traffic ahead.”

“As the General Staff wishes.”

Just as Colonel Lergen had hoped, the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion demonstrated their versatility backed by their ample experience. They could do anything: keep watch over the skies, remain vigilant to enemy fire, support the soldiers on the ground, do reconnaissance, relay orders, and even clear up traffic. The experience they had accumulated in the east was the real deal. These two companies, in particular, could do pretty much any task there was thanks to their time being overworked by General Zettour. For Colonel Lergen, acting as his superior was highly effective for the situation they were in.

As always, Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff would have to swallow whatever demands were made of her. Shutting away those thoughts, Colonel Lergen continuously bellowed his orders to advance.

“We need to cross this sector! Order the division to advance at full speed!”

“Wh-what about the horses?”

Colonel Lergen shouted at his assistant to make it work while telling his man to advance.

“We need to prioritize speed over all else! Have division command move to the front at once!”

Though his experience in the east was limited, this much was elementary. A commander must stand at the front, and always maintain a full awareness of the warfront. It was the same leadership shown by the great General Zettour. Just doing so was more than enough to take the vague authority that was rolled into the notion of being a *commander* and turn it into something that would bring his troops forward. Lieutenant General Jörg had employed the same tactic, but with his noble regimental commander’s untimely passing, the buck fell on the colonel to take control.

Colonel Lergen knew what he could do and he knew he couldn’t do it alone. There was no way he could break through the enemy’s line if he was going to do it alone, which was why he needed to do everything he could to keep his division close behind him.

This entailed taking on the role of rejecting the desires of the

younger officers around him to change his mind.

"W-we're going to leave our flank wide open at this rate! We need to wait for the troops behind us to catch up! Once they are here, we can—"

"We'll use the ocean for protection."

Brushing Major Joachim aside, he continued to make it clear that the division was to advance. They needed to advance while they could; there was no reason for them to remain stagnant. After all, the aerial mages had already cleared out the river that lay ahead. Colonel Lergen pointed out their new protection while he continued to walk forward.

"Th-the sea, Colonel?! What will we do about the side that is open land?!"

"We're going to prioritize our speed. Any more questions?"

"Our division is already ahead of schedule!"

"Worry not, Major. The Kampfgruppe will protect us on our land side. They can buy more than enough time for the other divisions to catch up."

"But, Commander?"

"The Salamander Kampfgruppe is at our side."

They could be trusted. With Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff in the skies and the soldiers she had raised from birth at their side, the Kampfgruppe's formation was as solid as could be. A fully armed Federal panzer unit could come charging in and it wouldn't be a problem.

He knew that they could dominate anything that crossed their path and continued their charge. His military exploits in the east instilled an incredible level of trust for Colonel Lergen in his Kampfgruppe.

"Now, officers, grab your things. You wouldn't want them to get wet."

What worried him most was having to rush through the river ahead. Still new to the division, he would pass the baton to each commanding officer under him to enact his orders. His natural duty as their head commander was to try and provide them with the support and tools they needed to carry out his orders. He needed to figure out how they would cross this river given the situation at hand. There was no bridge, and they couldn't afford to waste time waiting for the machines they needed to cross the river. Panzer units were as heavy as they came.

“Major, this division’s field engineers are up to par, yes?”

“Yes, Colonel.”

I see. Colonel Lergen nodded and collected his thoughts. The field engineers had equipment for crossing bodies of water on them at all times, but it was nothing more than basic boats.

These boats were both limited in numbers and slow. Their plan was to seize a bridge, but without time to find the nearest one, they needed to prioritize what they were missing. They would have to procure the necessary tools, and if there was no way for them to do their mission with what they had, then they would simply need to take it from their enemies. He learned this principle during his time under General Zettour.

So, how was he going to do it? The colonel reached for his radio and decided to make a bit of an unreasonable order.

“Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff, do you expect there is any machinery we can use across the river?”

“I’m sure there are a few small-sized vessels in the vicinity.”

The colonel shook his head. It wasn’t a bad place to start, but it wouldn’t be enough. He spoke a new request into his radio.

“Ideally, we want something that can move fast.”

“Something with a motor, perhaps? We may need to expand the area of our search if we hope to find something suitable.”

The last thing he wanted to do was waste time and spread his manpower thin. Due to the hurry they were in to get moving, these weren’t terms he could accept.

“…Then we’ll have to make do with smaller ships. I want the mages to tug the boats for us.”

He could tell Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff was likely astonished by the request by the rare hesitation she showed. The anger in her voice could be heard in the response she’d give a moment later.

“…We are not tugboats! We’re mages!”

“You can do it, right?”

The brief moment of reluctance that followed was almost cute. Before long, Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff would give in and raise a white flag at his demands.

“It can be done…”

That was all he needed to hear. “Good,” Colonel Lergen said with a smile and a nod as he put his radio away. It was a question of what *could be done*. The discontent of the mages could be dealt

with later. At this moment, the division needed to push forward more than anything else. For it wasn't a question of ability but of time.

This was how it always was.

"This feeling of being rushed…"

Time, time, time. How long had things been this way? Why did the Empire always find itself placed under such strict time constraints?

"This isn't something for me to think about."

What did the higher-ups—General Zettour—think about this? It wasn't a question for those on the ground to ponder, so there was no point in worrying about it. As the highest-ranking commanding officer on the field, his one and only task was to make sure his panzers found their way to the enemy capital.

"Ah, maybe that's why…"

No, it is definitely why. It suddenly dawned on him why Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff would—on occasion—express her opinion in a seemingly irritated fashion.

"Why do they never realize?"

Without thinking he said this aloud. He worried for a moment that someone near him may have heard his utterance, but collected himself with some deep breathing.

He was talking about how those in the rear couldn't see what happened on the ground. About how the occasional glimpse wasn't enough to make them understand. Why was this?

Maybe it was something a commander could only barely come to terms with after coughing up blood on the battlefield? If this experience was the only way to bring about understanding…then, unfortunately for General Rudersdorf, he could never have known the inner workings of General Zettour's mind.

"And that is what brings us here…"

Their victory in Ildoa was guaranteed. They would, at the very least, almost certainly accomplish their military goals. It was a strategy created by General Zettour after his return from the front lines.

That being said, there was nothing to be said for factors unrelated to the plan. Though, the General Staff officer in Lergen had an instinctive desire to keep himself unaffiliated with anything non-operation related. He didn't want to think about the political implications of conducting this operation.

His duty was to carry out the operation he was assigned to. If that was a military operation created by a man who had thorough knowledge of the pitfalls on the battlefield, then all he had to do was accomplish his role.

"I'm here on break, after all… I should be allowed to get away with this much."

THE SAME DAY, THE SALAMANDER KAMPFGRUPPE

The Salamanders never thought to question why they were leading the charge south down Ildoa's highway. They always led the vanguard, and they also always followed close behind. In other words, they were always all over the battlefield.

With this becoming the norm, the Salamanders saw the other army branches as their eternal reinforcements. As they were leading the charge, the commanding officer, Major Weiss, would use the *special right* that came with doing so without hesitation.

"We're going to collect vessels to cross the river! Find everything you can before our allies arrive. First Lieutenant Grantz, sorry, but I need you to head to across the river and bring me what you can find."

Major Weiss's orders would turn out to be foolish. After all, the Eighth Panzer Regiment had already stolen all the boats from their enemies. The notion that they had fallen behind, however, was inconceivable for the Salamander Kampfgruppe. The thought certainly never crossed Major Weiss's or his soldiers' minds.

You see, they were always there to push ahead of their allies. Using whatever was left behind by the enemy was a regular practice for them.

First Lieutenant Grantz and his men would surely bring back what they needed in no time as they flew off without hesitation. His confidence in them was precisely why they were going to attempt crossing the river in the first place.

Thus, First Lieutenant Grantz would be entirely caught off guard by the report given to him by Major Weiss.

"Major. It appears our allies pushed ahead of us."

"What? Our allies?"

Major Weiss's eyes widened as if to show he had no idea what the first lieutenant was saying. First Lieutenant Grantz—also in a state of shock—would give his report in a shrill voice.

"For the love of all things holy, I thought we were the vanguard, but the panzer units have pushed ahead. It's the Eighth Panzer Regiment; they've already crossed the river."

"They pushed past us? Are you sure these are friendlies we are talking about?"

Major Weiss was having a difficult time processing this information. He was used to always being the tip of the spear in the east. They had come to Ildoa with pride in their unparalleled speed and what they had accomplished thus far.

The Kampfgruppe was full of Named mages. Their tankers, gunners, and infantry were equally skilled. Everyone was outstanding compared to any other regiment. All of the soldiers had been strictly educated under the sharp eyes of Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff.

There was another reason the battle-hardened soldiers continuously dove directly into the fray of battle. Always being in the vanguard meant that the regiment earned the right to plunder whatever equipment was abandoned by their enemies. The major was wholly convinced that he and the other mage troops were thoroughly used where they were most needed.

And yet, these very mages had fallen behind? If it were true, it would be quite a surprise. The Eighth Panzer Regiment must've developed an elite mage unit of its own.

"To think someone else would get to our prey first… It appears there are personnel I don't know about yet in the Empire. The Eighth Panzer Regiment, was it? Who is leading their mage troops?"

"Well, the thing is…"

"Did they bring General Romel all the way out here for this?"

"No, not quite. But you're not too far off…ha-ha-ha."

Red flags sprang up in the major's mind. His instincts told him what he didn't want to hear.

"It's the colonel. She's…"

Oh. While this made complete sense to him, Major Weiss would cut off the first lieutenant. One could always hope he was wrong, after all.

"Yes, there are so many personnel I don't know yet in the Empire. I'm sure there are lots of female lieutenant colonels, First

Lieutenant."

"But, Major Weiss. Surely you know which lieutenant colonel I'm talking about, right?"

"So I guess we're talking about the same beloved battalion commander of ours—the same Aerial Magic officer from the General Staff Office."

Major Weiss, certain that there was no one else who it could be, had his belief affirmed by First Lieutenant Grantz with a wholehearted nod.

"Who else could it be?"

The world sure was a small place. Or maybe it was the battlefields that were small?

Talk about living on the battlefield.

"You should've seen the look on the colonel's face as she tugged a bunch of tiny boats across the river. It looks like she got to all of the boats first."

Hm. This made the major cross his arms and sigh.

Hearing that the Eighth Panzer Regiment used mages to tug boats across a river, it was clear to him that they would use any means necessary to carry out their goal.

"Looks like she got to the goods first."

They certainly weren't slow in their advance, but perhaps they shouldn't have let their guard down.

"I didn't think we would be up against the lieutenant colonel…"

He let out the idle complaint with a sigh that could be heard over his radio.

"This is no joke."

"It sure isn't."

Just as First Lieutenant Grantz pointed out, things wouldn't be easy if they were competing with the lieutenant colonel. It was only natural for one to want to let out a grumble or two. But, as he was the acting commander, he had a choice to make—remedial measures were necessary.

"I'm sorry to have to ask this, First Lieutenant, but you'll have to head out and find what you can."

He gave the orders to First Lieutenant Grantz before calling together his Kampfgruppe and sharing the situation.

"This has gotten complicated."

The hasty Captain Ahrens responded first with an intrepid grin.

"Have you sighted the enemy?"

“No, Captain. It’s a friendly.”

Oh? It wasn’t the answer he was looking for. The major saw what was likely the expression he showed only moments earlier. Unable to bear seeing their faces, the major would repeat himself.

“Captain, they’re friendlies. The troops ahead of us are friendlies.”

The tank officer—who showed the blankest of stares—clapped his hands to show he understood.

“Did something happen to the troops following us in the charge? Maybe the foot soldiers are running late?”

The major could see what the man was thinking. It was written all over his face: *How is that any different from how things usually are?* It was also clear that the fact that troops had pulled ahead of them wasn’t taking hold. It had been a long time since any of his men placed any faith in their comrades. All of this was also painful for the major, as he shared the same sentiment. It was the norm for the Kampfgruppe, after all.

Nevertheless, whether the strange situation should be called an unimaginable turn of events or a plot twist, he thought to himself how peculiar fate could be at times.

Recognizing that such preconceptions stood to cloud their view of reality, Major Weiss decided to tell his men the circumstances afoot.

“There are friendly troops that have pulled ahead of us.”

The man leading the mechanized units would have something to say about this. With a blank look on his face, Captain Ahrens asked the major to repeat himself.

“I’m sorry, I think I may have misheard you. What did you just say?”

“I’m talking about our comrades in a different division. They’ve advanced past us.”

Seeing each face in his entire battalion shrugging off the remark as a joke, Major Weiss took the initiative to explain further. Perhaps they had all been a bit too arrogant.

“It’s the truth. An allied panzer unit has pushed forward. The Eighth Panzer Regiment… They’re only ahead by a small margin, but nevertheless, they are currently leading the charge.”

It was hard for any of them to believe.

He could see the bewilderment in their eyes as he nodded with sympathy and continued his explanation.

“I should mention that our dear lieutenant colonel is acting as their personal close air support.”

The news of such was enough to make the band of soldiers, unfazed even by the likes of an enemy attack, all go dizzy. For better or worse, the men were taken aback by this unforeseen development.

“Well, that’s just not fair… That explains why we’re lagging behind.”

Captain Meybert’s childish remark resonated deeply with the entire battalion. They all shared the same thought.

It’s not fair.

Although, this served as an opportunity for them to reset their collective thought process. They all thought of the circumstances they were in.

And they knew that with the lieutenant colonel on the front lines, they were no longer leading the charge. Caught up by the thought, the officers all began to think about what it meant for them to fall behind. Though they couldn’t say it out loud, there was a certain merit to leading the charge they all had in mind: The best loot was always waiting for the first soldiers up front.

In a very literal sense, the first to the show could commandeer any goods they wanted. The front of the vanguard always got what they wanted. With their position up front effectively stolen, it would be slim pickings for them when they had to compete with the other divisions.

The oil, food, and other equipment they could pillage from their felled enemy was a significant incentive that fueled their charge. In this way, any resources that could be taken from their enemies were very important. This was especially true in the east, where getting provisions from their own country was always difficult.

Nevertheless, there was only so much equipment that the enemy would inevitably abandon, and they needed to compete with their own allies for it.

Heading in first was necessary depending on the time and circumstances, but a lack of rewards could cause their charge to stall.

In this light, it was First Lieutenant Tospan who—lacking in the hesitation department—raised the point on everybody’s mind.

“Maybe we shouldn’t push ourselves too much this time.”

“Yes,” Major Weiss said mechanically, and began to nod. While

connecting the vanguard with the reinforcements was an important military role, it was hard to agree with his suggestion. The reason for this was clear.

"Hmm, how should I put this… That doesn't sit well with me, either."

The mage officer in Major Weiss made him shake his head. It was clear to the major that he needed to say a bit more when he saw his subordinates stare blankly back at him.

As an experienced mage officer, picking up on mana signals was second nature for the major.

"I think Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff may be reaching out to us. I can feel the constant, steady stream of her signal. If we're late while she's watching us…"

A horrifying thought. It was almost alarming how they could already see her reprimanding them in their minds. The group of adult officers all trembled together. The fear of being reprimanded sent an almost-strange sense of excitement in their minds.

"You don't think so, do you? But, no…"

One of the men called out with a look of shock. Captain Ahrens, who up until just a moment ago had his arms folded in silence, began to lose his composure.

"For a mage to create a stream of mana, that means…she wants us to know she is there, right?"

The captain immediately wanted to get back into the command vehicle. It was written all over his face, and his apprehensions were fully understood by his peers.

"You're right, Captain Ahrens! You're completely right!"

It was like they had a fire lit under their asses. An intense sense of urgency overcame Major Weiss as he practically yelled out his orders.

"It's just as the commander said!"

Major Weiss wasn't about to forget the warning Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff had so diligently given him.

"I don't know about the other divisions, but we have specific orders to *lead* the vanguard! We can't afford to fall behind any of the other divisions, even if we're up against the lieutenant colonel!"

There was no way she would forgive them after giving such direct orders. Her orders were almost too simple, and she wasn't the type to entertain exceptions. Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff being on the front lines didn't change her orders in the slightest. This

much was obvious—it wasn't even worth discussing.

Orders were orders. This was true even in the cataclysmic event where, say, the sun suddenly stopped rising. They needed to carry out their mission. The men quickly realized that they didn't have time to stand around and chat idly, and certainly not about slowing their pace.

They were told to lead the vanguard. That was it. Those were their orders. Therefore, it was imperative that the Kampfgruppe strived for just that.

"We should've thought more about why she was so insistent about us leading the charge when she gave us the orders."

With a look of understanding, Major Weiss folded his arms and gave a deep nod.

"She knew that friendly forces would pull ahead. That was why she gave us such specific orders!"

It didn't matter what Tanya truly meant; this was how her subordinates interpreted her orders.

Their experience and military-centered thought process led them to a conclusion that may have been different than what Tanya actually intended. That said, with her not being there, Tanya's soldiers would act in accordance with the answer they came up with.

It was First Lieutenant Tospan who spoke for everybody a second time.

"At this rate…the Salamander Kampfgruppe may just be pegged as lazy the next time we work with the other branches of the army."

Captain Meybert nodded with a grim expression.

"I can hear them now, talking about how the best of the best from each of the army's divisions got left behind in the charge…"

It wasn't the reputation they wanted for the Kampfgruppe. The simple notion of tardiness was lost on them. They always moved according to plan and according to schedule.

It was a small point of pride for them, a pride backed by their numerous achievements. If there was even a hint of arrogance… then they needed to do everything in their power to do away with it.

"We can think about fuel and whatnot later."

The group of officers all nodded at Major Weiss's remark. Up until they finished nodding, they all moved in tandem. From there, their habits varied depending on what branch of the army they

were from.

Captain Ahrens from the panzer unit showed an eagerness to return to his panzer as soon as possible.

Captain Meybert was restless as he thought about how to prepare the cannons to be moved.

The foot soldiers all showed a deep, pensive look, signifying their firm resolution.

Though their expressions varied, they shared the same goal. Not a single soldier objected to Major Weiss's opinion that they should charge. After all, they had Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff waving her flag at them to *get moving* far off in the distance.

They needed to reclaim their spot as the vanguard at all costs. Reaffirming their crystal clear orders to maintain their focus, the Kampfgruppe officers had set their priorities straight.

"We're going to advance. The colonel's orders aside, we can't allow the Lergen Division to get too far ahead of us."

Major Weiss gave the orders he was supposed to. He offered a wry smile as he continued.

"Captain Meybert, my apologies, but I will need you to do something difficult. We may need you to support us with direct cannon fire after all."

With the artillery division far behind in the charge, they were going to need to use all their resources to focus on moving as quickly as possible.

"I knew there was no way there would be nothing for me to do this time. It's the same wringer as always."

The artillery officer grimaced before promptly proceeding to do the tasks that had become second nature for him.

"I can probably make things work with horses and towing vehicles. We're running low on fuel. You better prepare some wine for my men when this is all over."

Captain Meybert shared his desire with a grumble, to which Johann-Mattäus Weiss gave his answer without hesitation.

"You can look forward to it."

"Oh? And where are you going to find any wine?"

The shrewd tank officer asked this on behalf of his men. The state of the Kampfgruppe's provisions was common knowledge. With their main goal to advance as quickly as possible, they had to leave behind anything superfluous, and thus, there was no wine to be found in the entire Kampfgruppe.

Major Weiss was unashamed of the answer he'd give to this question.

"We'll get what we need from the enemies. And if they don't have any, there will be friendlies who were dumb enough to bring some with them behind us in the charge we can take it from."

Sounds simple, right? Major Weiss was confident in his words. His suggestion brought about a strange turn of fate when the usually agreeable panzer officer pushed back.

"We probably shouldn't take it from allies, though, right?

He was a bit shocked as he asked his question, but First Lieutenant Tospan and Captain Meybert had long lost their habit of viewing regulations as sacred and inviolable.

"How sophisticated of you, Captain Ahrens."

"The major is right, though. It's all about your approach and making do with what you have."

The two officers were willing to use their imaginations and sang their praises for adaptability. For better or worse, they had learned to think for themselves during their time in the navy. The training for those who worked on the docks could change a man.

"First Lieutenant Tospan?"

The first lieutenant foot soldier gave a brief chuckle at the surprised panzer officer.

"Necessity is the mother of invention. We learned this back on the docks the hard way. I don't want to die at war while adhering to regulations."

With an expression that was as serious as could be, he shared his true feelings.

"One thing's for sure; I definitely don't want to be the one to have to explain why we were late to the lieutenant colonel. If you've experienced the desire to shoot someone for their incompetence, the last thing you want to do is become incompetent yourself."

A fed-up Captain Meybert chimed in when he saw the blank stares on his men's faces.

"You know how we got into an argument with the navy about defending the port, right? They came at us with their regulatory bullshit, demanding we give them the proper paperwork. Thanks to those idiots, we didn't have enough time to welcome Commonwealth Command when they showed up at our front door unannounced."

First Lieutenant Tospan also shared his disdain for the incompetent with a fierce nod.

“They really screwed us over that time! I hate those who ignore reality for the sake of rules and regulations. What a worthless bunch of people.”

The leader of the incredibly rational and logical officers who made up the Salamander Kampfgruppe had instilled in them a golden rule: to always face reality.

They were forced to become realists during their time in the east fighting the Federation. The same went for their enemies. For the Federation—which was initially viewed as a bunch of Communists—the Imperial soldiers set aside their ignorant ideology and began to view their troops as nothing more than a way for the Imperial war machine to sharpen its blades.

The sanctity of bureaucracy did nothing for them when they were under enemy artillery fire. These men, all thoroughly baptized by blood and steel, accepted and even resonated with First Lieutenant Tospan’s anger. For better or worse, this was them adapting to this war. Necessity provided the men with the premise they needed to accept the first lieutenant’s sentiment. The group was beginning to go so far as to justify them plundering their allies. Such thoughts were not had without hesitation, of course.

Nevertheless, they all thought the same thing. After all, who would they rather make excuses to? The commanding officer of their Kampfgruppe, Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff? Or some other branch of the military?

Their orders were to charge with all their might to begin with. Thus the men all conspired together.

“If our choices are between bureaucrats and the lieutenant colonel, it should be clear who we should prioritize. I definitely don’t want to have to cry in front of the lieutenant colonel!”

Major Weiss made the decision for the entire group and none of the officers present disagreed. They all nodded, ready to do their parts. With duty and necessity requiring them to do so, they were sure of their decision. They were more afraid of becoming incompetent soldiers and drawing ire from their superior than they were of any enemy.

Sometimes, things could be sped up by unintended synergies. What would come to be known as the Lergen Division led the vanguard for the Imperial army's invasion of Ildoa.

For Colonel Lergen, whose command was only temporary, the pleasure he felt tearing through the enemy forces using maneuver warfare turned into an anxiety that he may be isolating his forces. Stranding themselves in enemy territory was a scary possibility.

As any contact with the rear was dangerously exposed to anyone listening, the reinforcements that followed behind on foot were not alerted to the vanguard's new pace. Just as he was thinking about how he likely could expect any support from friendly troops…he received new information from Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff out on reconnaissance.

Surprisingly enough, the report had been organized into documents for him to read. He wondered if she wrote them while she was flying. That would be quite crafty and dexterous to boot.

"I knew the mage troops were convenient to use, but to think they would go this far…"

The mages' convenience knew no bounds. Not only did they perform reconnaissance and cover fire, they even acted as liaisons between the different parts of the division. An experienced Aerial Magic officer could do just about anything.

Unfortunately, they were too convenient. The regrettable fact that their convenience was what made them so overused on each of the war fronts made it difficult to replenish any personnel they lost.

It was even worse for a mage who was this highly treasured—a mage with the Silver Wings Assault Badge, and multiple of them at that. Not only had she found information on the enemy forces, but she also included reconnaissance on their own troops. There was even information on the gap in the enemy's defensive line. The superb report included everything a commanding officer would ever want to know.

Although, the colonel let out a wry chuckle when he saw which division was following his own.

"To think that Salamander Kampfgruppe would be trailing us. That Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff is a rascal, she is."

He certainly never chalked her up as just some hunting dog who only knew how to fight battles, and yet, she always managed to exceed his imagination.

Perhaps people with common sense like myself are just too thick in

the skull.

The colonel let out words that could have been taken as either admiration or surprise.

"She sure has her troops on a tight leash."

He initially questioned the decision to keep the lieutenant colonel back on reserve duty…but it seemed her soldiers were trained well enough to hold their own.

If only they had dozens of General Staff officers who were also talented mages, it would certainly make maneuver warfare much easier.

No. Colonel Lergen shook his head.

"Would we ever mass produce and deploy soldiers like her…?"

It was a farfetched idea, even for himself. Almost enough to have him questioning why he would even play with the idea in the first place. It would be a gargantuan disaster if they had that many Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaffs flying around.

"There really must be something wrong with me today."

The colonel grumbled to himself as he reached for his cigarettes and a lighter. He took in the nicotine and blew out a plume of dark smoke in an unpleasant sigh, but it wasn't enough to take his attention off the subject.

Just earlier he had thought about a more amiable Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff. Now he was toying with the idea of mass producing her as she was.

"War is terrible…"

It was enough to have him thinking, even for a moment, of a horde of tiny rational Degurechaff beasts. If he were the same man he was the first day he saw her back at the military academy, he surely would have doubted his own sanity.

"Have I gone insane?"

The rate at which reality changed was incredible. As the ashes fell from his cigarette to the ground, the colonel decided to take a more entertaining point of view for the unsalvageable reality he found himself in.

The war would swallow all his whining, his grumbles, and his common sense. All he would have left was his logic.

It was cruel, clear, and easy enough to understand if one was unfortunate enough to understand it.

So this is why General Zettour sent me here.

Did the general need somebody who knew the worst parts of

the east? Or maybe General Zettour sought an officer with a demeanor starkly different from his own. Whichever the case may be, his staffing decision definitely wasn't normal.

Lergen thought to himself about how unpleasant the idea was. This was the human reaction to have, but it only got worse from there…

"I can understand his thought process…"

The attack they were making was the first part of what would be the best move to make.

The colonel's good senses cried out, *It can't be.* To which his logic kicked up its feet onto the desk in his mind and responded, *You bet your ass it is.* He wondered how soldiers like Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff felt about a conflict such as this.

"Colonel! Wait, Colonel!"

As Colonel Lergen was about to board the command vehicle, he donned a slightly peeved expression when he heard Major Joachim's voice calling out for him as he ran toward him.

"What is it this time, Major?"

"Colonel…things are getting worse."

Unlike his eyes in the sky, the men he had to deal with on the ground could be such a pain. Colonel Lergen was starting to get annoyed, but he took the time to listen to his major's complaints.

"Th-the soldiers are reaching their limits. We're starting to lose control over our main formation, Colonel Lergen. I think we should rest to give each of our units time to regroup."

"We can't do that."

"B-but, sir!"

The young General Staff officer's voice was exasperated as he made his plea. Colonel Lergen responded without even glancing at the man in the same fashion his own superior always did.

Any time the officer had to make complaints needed to be spent on doing his job.

"We can't give the enemy troops time to fortify their formation. What's more, if we stop moving now, the Salamander Kampfgruppe's flank will be left wide open."

What they needed to do was self-evident so long as they both shared an understanding of the situation. There were no second chances when it came to *time* and *opportunities* in war. Once they were on the tightrope, they needed to cross it or fall off. With no lifeline tying them back to their home nation, falling off meant

plunging to their death. Their only hope was to push forward with all their might.

"Our best option is to keep advancing while the enemy is still confused. We could easily take down an entire brigade with what we have now."

"Our troops can't take much more abuse…"

The young officer was speaking the truth. Colonel Lergen recognized the exhaustion in the man's voice. Everything he said was a matter of fact. While he would show his sympathy for the troops, the colonel shared his reasoning.

"Everything is fine as long as they're still alive."

It appeared his partner had yet to pick up on what he was trying to say as he returned a blank stare. Nevertheless, if they were blessed with the fate of making it through this…he would surely come to know the truth. A truth that all officers should learn, not just Major Joachim.

"You need to advance when you can. It's a fundamental truth when fighting a war."

At that moment, he remembered a ridiculous excursion he went on with the General Staff during his time at the war college. He remembered the teachers yelling out difficult tactical questions and insults at him when he was at his most exhausted. He had to whip his exhausted brain into making the quick decisions they demanded.

It was the education that would prove most useful in his career. Even with their physical exhaustion eating away at their decision-making capacity, he knew that day that he needed to advance as necessity dictated.

"Right now, our tired soldiers merely have to live with dissatisfaction."

However, Colonel Lergen spoke of the folly of throwing away their advantage in mobility with great conviction.

"Tomorrow will likely be an awful day for us all. The soldiers may have to hear the screams of their friends dying in the trenches."

The enemy could easily set up a simple base of operations if they were given time. He didn't know what kind of fortifications the Ildoans would erect, but even the flimsiest of trenches would be a pain to deal with.

To hell with fighting anyone who hides in their trenches.

Just how much time and how many lives were wasted clearing out such futile attempts at resistance? Wasting both precious human resources and time only to fail an operation was out of the question. He didn't even want to play with the idea.

"Sacrifices that can be saved are meaningless. The grudges held by the soldiers today will be nothing compared to the grudges their bereaved families will hold if we wait until tomorrow. The family members live to hold a grudge, after all."

If kindness was going to get his men killed, then he didn't need kindness. Being a part of an evil organization, he needed to use his men to their cores based on logic and necessity so he could send them back home alive.

Colonel Lergen made this sad fact evident to the tepid officer.

"We are using our speed to acquire time. If we stop because we're tired, we'll have to buy that time back with human lives."

"Enemies may surround us at this rate! If we advance too much, the panzer unit will…!"

He was correct to doubt this. Advancing too far always came with the danger of becoming isolated in enemy territories. Before the war, his opinion would've been lauded as sensible. This, however, was total war, and with the Empire having run out of options, they no longer had the luxury of weighing the risks against merits.

The correct answer wasn't always right.

"You might be right about that, if we stop our advance. Now, let's head south."

"Colonel?!"

Major Joachim questioned Colonel Lergen's sanity, to which he responded with a lighthearted chuckle.

"Speed is our only friend right now, so quit your whining. You can do that all you want when you've made it to Valhalla."

"…Are you being serious?"

"I am the commanding officer, and I intend to follow the General Staff Office's orders. What else do you want from me? Right now, you need to advance. Now get your tanks moving."

The Lergen Division's advance, as witnessed by his peers, was succinctly described as a suicide charge. Some of the other officers

in the division questioned the commander's state of mind. Nevertheless, it wouldn't go down in history as a failure on the Imperial Army's part or a problem with its leadership.

"The Great Advance."

It would go down in military history as a rare, exceptional case.

Though it always came with the addendum that the advance definitely wasn't something that could ever be replicated or made into a model for sensible command, experts would always reluctantly pen the advance's greatness. They would question if it actually ever happened as they did so. Historians, on the other hand, simply praised it as a great miracle.

Anyone with a bit of surface knowledge on the subject would often explain, with the air of a know-it-all, how it was a tried and true technique learned in the east and applied to their charge in the south. That Colonel Lergen, who was well versed in Ildoan geopolitical affairs and topography, had made his return from the east.

With the friendly troops who made up the Lergen Kampfgruppe at his flank, the experienced General Staff officer made the *correct decision* to successfully charge with the panzer units he was so accustomed to fighting with.

It was worth every ounce of praise from a militaristic standpoint as his decision proved to contribute to the Empire's ability to fight in Ildoa tremendously.

They took over all of the important military points, secured a horizontal defensive line, and eliminated a threat to the Empire.

And thus, a tragic new quagmire developed in the northern territories of Ildoa. At the same time, Ildoa's allied forces would conduct various different strategies in response.

This was the spot where the delusional Empire would try to reclaim its raison d'état and fight for survival. The conflict there would come to be called "Zettour's Toy Box." It was full of death and bullets. The bodies that piled up were either patriots fighting for said raison d'état, or innocent victims of the con artist playing his hand to pull out on top.

The world shut its mouth and shook its head, refusing all discussion on the matter.

The detestable con artist he was, General Zettour's art of war amounted to chaos and confusion. This was why the officers and soldiers who fought in his war would all unwillingly utter the same

sentiment.

That there existed a man to be feared.

They would learn of his presence every day on the battlefield.

Hans von Zettour.

A Junker. An old, mild-mannered soldier with an unappealing scholarly bent of mind.

He created a toy box. A toy box with a single word etched in blood on it: *Necessity*.

This was largely why Ildoa would never forget the conflict they were wrangled into. They cursed everything about the events that transpired, including the name *Lergen*.

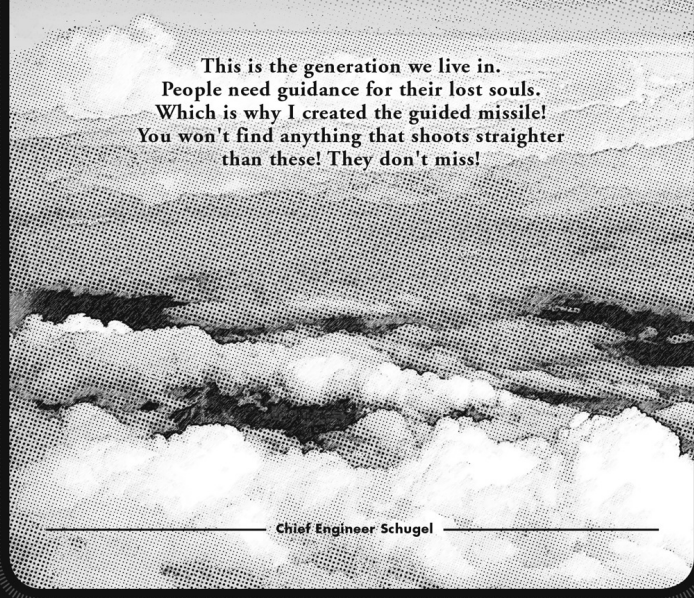
Their disdain for him was above all else when they learned his role in the attack. Nobody knew of him at the time, but they would learn. That his frequent diplomatic visits were a guise for him to plunge Zettour's dagger into Ildoa's heart.

Additionally, although Colonel Lergen would go on to describe the series of events that led to his role in the Ildoan campaign in memoirs, he would write off his role in the charge as nothing more than him *fulfilling his duty as an Imperial soldier in a war he didn't wish to fight*.

[chapter]

VI

Impact



[chapter] VI Impact

NOVEMBER 12, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, AT ILDOAN BORDER COMMAND

The Imperial Army's war machine was a picture of perfection at the start of the Empire's campaign in Ildoa. Having been baptized by years of intense combat, the Imperial Army's prewar army was already history. It's not as if the Ildoan Army hadn't updated their training and education with modern combat techniques. Any claims to the contrary were false.

The Ildoan Army was, unfortunately, outclassed in every sense of the term.

The Imperial Army had learned how to fight a modern war by paying the bloody tuition on the battlefield. The indisputable disparity between the Empire, which had been christened by a continuous stream of blood and steel, and the forever-neutral Ildoan Army quickly made itself evident. A nation long at war, its army understood implicitly what it meant to fight. This made for a difference as brutal as it was stark when it came to understanding modern warfare. Any amount of effort put forward or attempt to resist an enemy invasion meant nothing without truly knowing what it meant to fight an enemy.

The Ildoan Army, which knew peace, was pushed back by the Imperial Army, which knew war. Caught up in the maelstrom of chaos, the situation for the troops stationed in the alpine mountains in charge of defending Ildoan Border Command was as terrible as it was for the entire Ildoan Army. With the forces being unready to mobilize at the start of the hostilities on its borders, the Ildoan

troops had to go up against the Imperial Army unprepared and short on manpower.

This amounted to a military nightmare. There was an incredible difference between troops accustomed to war and those who enjoyed prolonged peace. By the time the latter had awakened to the reality of war, its flames were already knocking at their nation's door—along with the battering ram of Imperial heavy artillery and long-distance railway guns.

A valiant resistance, and nothing more, was the most the Ildoan Army could hope to pull off.

The first person to quickly come to this unfortunate conclusion was none other than Colonel Calandro himself.

For better or worse, Colonel Calandro knew firsthand how this usually played out, for he had once joined the Lergen Kampfgruppe in the east to study its tactics right next to the experts who coordinated them.

"Son of a bitch…"

When he saw them, he thought their methods were insane; their insistence on prioritizing penetration above all else dumbfounded him. He had seen firsthand the torrent of violence they struck the Federation Army with.

"This is all just a show. Their real goal is to penetrate our defensive line. Fuck, fuck, fuck."

His usual refined demeanor disappeared as his mind raced to create an accurate picture of the war front. The enemy forces were a spear that had breached their border and was racing for their heart.

The tip of a spear may be sharp, but that's not the case for its flat side.

"Should we flank them?"

No, they couldn't organize such an attack amid the chaos that had broken out. Even if he tried, he wouldn't be able to—he wasn't their commanding officer!

They needed to order a retreat, an immediate and organized retreat. Ideally, they could make like the Federation and employ a scorched earth tactic to burn anything that could be useful to their enemies. Decisive action needed to be taken quickly to have any chance of dulling the Empire's blade.

He quickly formulated the advice he would give, only to shrug and laugh at himself when he realized that it likely wouldn't be

accepted.

"This is a terrible strategy to have to take…"

He already knew the response he would get if he advised the commanding officer, whose responsibility was to *defend the country*, to burn everything and escape as quickly as possible.

"All I can do is give advice on the situation… How frustrating."

His advice was useless if he knew it wouldn't be accepted. He knew ways to fight against the Imperial forces, but he was a lowly General Staff officer who was merely placed at the border. What he needed was authority.

Though irritated at his lack of power, he faithfully carried out his duty. He was patriotic enough to make his case directly to the commanding officer.

I knew this was how it would turn out.

Although his suggestion was appropriate for the strange circumstances of the war that had been forced onto them, it also collided with his commander's respectable sensibilities.

"You must be mad?! You want us to retreat?!"

"It's what must be done, General!"

"Choose your words wisely, Colonel Calandro! Your shame should keep you from even suggesting something like that!"

His attempt to persuade the general was fruitless.

The general was red with rage at the suggestion. He shook his head in flat-out refusal. The general for border command would make it clear that he was a good person with the next thing he said.

"Colonel Calandro! The Royal Ildoan Army needs to defend its territory!"

"We can't throw away everything for a single position! You must give the orders to retreat!"

"This is Ildoa! There are no parts of Ildoa we'll give up without a fight! We are Ildoans, damn it!"

The general reprimanded Colonel Calandro with a bloodcurdling scream. Any sensible member of an organization would shrink in the face of such rage from a superior, but the colonel's duty was still his duty. As his sense of professional duty outweighed his common sense, he would share the wicked principles of war with his superior.

"General! Our enemy is a carefully tuned instrument of violence built to fight this war! They are a barbaric military state that has lost all conception of politics and diplomacy, but there is still one

thing they excel at, and that is war!"

"So you want us to just surrender our border?!"

"We are no longer in a position to maintain it! Right now, we have to save what we can!"

"Our forces are resisting all over the border! We've managed to push most of them back where we've engaged them!"

The commander slammed his fist on a map that showed he was partially correct. *Most* of the Imperial forces were indeed engaged with several border defense divisions.

But it meant nothing—the general was wrong.

"General! These engagements are nothing more than a distraction from their main target! While they have our forces mired in combat, they will try to destroy our chain of command!"

"We need to defend our posts and find a way to counterattack! How could you forget such basic defense principles at a time like this, Colonel?!"

"That's not the issue here!" Colonel Calandro shouted in rebuttal. His entire body shook with frustration at his inability to convey his point to the commander. It could be heard in his voice as they shared a passionate shouting match.

Just as things were getting heated, an intruder came rushing into the room, forcing its door open with a loud swing.

"What the hell?!"

Colonel Calandro reflexively put himself between the general and the *intruder* while questioning who he was. It didn't take him long, though, to realize he had seen the man before.

"First Lieutenant, what is it this time?"

It's that messenger from before… This man really needs to learn to maintain his composure.

It was growing apparent that the man wasn't suited for such a high-stress job.

"G-General! There isn't any time, General!"

So panicked that his words weren't making any sense. Colonel Calandro offered the man a seat to calm him down, but the officer shook his head furiously and continued speaking as if he was in a race against time.

"Th-the enemy panzer forces are…"

"Did they break through our line? Calm yourself down and explain the situation to the general."

Colonel Calandro looked at the map on the desk, expecting that

the forces they were waiting for were on their way. It was exactly how it was back in the east.

The Imperial Army's panzer units were the same as the Lergen Kampfgruppe he'd seen once before. They were going to find a weakness in their defensive line and use it against them to pull a tactical victory from a single battle.

"Be more precise with your reporting! Where are they?"

In response to the demands to clarify himself, all the officer did was point down in a general direction.

"…Th-they're here."

Where is here? Where is this man pointing? Does he have any idea how precious our time is?!

"Point at the map, man, the map!"

Colonel Calandro's angry demands were met with words that came flowing out of the man like a broken dam.

"They're right here! Right next to the command center!"

"What? They're here?!"

"A m-member of the military police saw them coming… They will be—"

—*Here soon.* His next words were muffled by the sound of cannon fire. It was the roar of a shell whizzing through the air nearby.

The booming sound wasn't something that could be mistaken. Was it tank fire? Or a field gun? It didn't matter.

Fully comprehending the situation, Colonel Calandro almost screeched the following words.

"They're here for a decapitation strike!"

An attack against their command center—it was a complex technique frequently employed by General Zettour in the east. Through thorough maneuver warfare, they would take out the enemy's top in command and cause confusion throughout the battlefield. As a result, their enemy would lose before they could ever regain their bearings on the situation. It was too late for them by the time they were cursing the tactic.

Colonel Calandro promptly shouted his new suggestion.

"Commander! You need to escape and move the command section immediately!"

"You are the one who needs to escape, Colonel. I need to stay back and command my…"

"There is nothing left to command! We need to leave before

they dominate us!"

If they didn't protect their head, their body would fall apart.

Colonel Calandro continued to shout at the commander about what the war needed from them.

"We need to cede land to buy us time! We'll lose our forces to the north along with the entire territory if we don't act fast to organize our defensive line!"

The colonel's desperate appeal, along with the second round of artillery fire, was enough to get the commander to begin changing his mind.

"We will move our headquarters. However…"

The enemy was already at their front door. The commander was having difficulty letting his post go, but such wasn't worth a moment's consideration for Colonel Calandro.

"I'll stay here and hold the fort as long as I can."

"Wait, you will?"

"I know I'm not a member of border patrol, but I retain my authority from the General Staff. I believe it should be enough for me to act as the field commander for this battle…"

There was at least the precedent for him to take control. It wasn't going to be a pleasant job, but they needed people who could get things done, and he couldn't allow himself to leave his post as someone who could.

The general looked into the duty-driven colonel's eyes and shook his head.

"I'm sorry…Colonel… I was—"

—Wrong about you.

The colonel cut the general off before he could finish.

"The enemy has a limited ability to advance. Make sure our forces can regroup far away from here."

He would worry about himself.

Colonel Calandro prepared for the commander's escape and to move their headquarters while gathering as many military personnel as he could to fight back.

Although, that wasn't very many people.

"The best we could do was two battalions."

It was everyone at the base, including his own guard envoy. At a time of war, an entire division should have been defending their base at their border.

That being said, the silver lining to their dismal numbers was

the fact that they had all the weapons they could ask for. They couldn't ask for more guns and equipment with their reserve armory at their fingertips. Not that this actually mattered—they didn't have anywhere near enough personnel to operate the weaponry, as their men had yet to be adequately mobilized.

It was a group of mismatched units, armed to the teeth.

"So we'll be up against a Kampfgruppe."

Colonel Calandro showed a wry grin as he smoked the cigars that were distributed to the army's commanding officers. It was a little gift forgotten by the general. Surely he wouldn't mind the colonel helping himself to a cigar, considering what he was about to go through.

A smoking break could provide brief therapy for his troubled mind. Or, at the very least, it acted as a small ceremony for men about to face their harsh reality.

"…We're going to have to take a page from the Empire's book on this one."

He was referring to the Empire's method of scraping by with what they had—a tactic born from trial and error on the battlefield. Coming together, seeing what they had available, and dispersing was their way of fighting with limited resources. He realized this was their doctrine to maintain the quick pace with which they fought the war.

It was easy to understand the merit to this once he was forced to copy their tactics. He could hardly believe they had been making this style work up until now.

"It may be suicide to try and use their own techniques against them…"

Their disadvantage was immediately clear to Colonel Calandro; it didn't take an expert to realize this. The enemies were filled to the brim with fighting spirit, and he barely had enough troops to form a proper formation.

They could only do what was possible for them. The colonel thought about what that was before he eventually realized that *their only victory would be to prevent the enemy from getting their hands on their ample armaments*.

"We're going to conduct a fighting retreat! We won't be able to bring any of the slower cannons with us. Make sure to blow them to pieces. Burn everything we don't need!"

He would make another realization while he was ordering his

men to prepare the explosives. Just as Colonel Calandro knew they couldn't afford to let everything they had fall into the enemy's clutches, he also remembered the importance of logistical flow. Though not without a moment's…the colonel would give a deep breath before giving his orders.

"We're going to blow up the bridge."

Such was the sole option that was left for the Ildoan forces on the border. It was a barbaric one that the historians of the time despised, but also the only option made available to them via basic military rationale—a scorched earth strategy.

The borderline over-the-top display of retrograde operations would come to be known as "Calandro's firework show." It did, however, successfully stop the Imperial Army in its tracks at a decisive moment.

It was a terribly unpopular decision, even at the time. It was even met with resistance from the field engineer who received the orders to blow everything up.

"Almost e-everything here is a h-historic artifact…?!"

The answer Colonel Calandro gave the man would come to be known by all Ildoans as a textbook military dilemma.

The colonel, sporting the same grim expression he'd had this entire time, muttered his famous words:

"I don't want the Kingdom of Ildoa to become a historical artifact."

Though not without considerable reluctance, the decision would come to be recognized—from *time to time*—by most historians as an appropriate decision given the circumstances. Third parties would even occasionally refer to it as a good decision.

Colonel Calandro, who received both criticism and praise for his choice, would view what he did with a calmer mindset.

For him, it was a terrible memory of a fight he could never be proud of.

NOVEMBER 16, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, THE NORTHERN ILDOAN TERRITORY

With the Eighth Panzer Regiment, the elite vanguard headed by the Salamander Kampfgruppe, pushing as far south as it's going to get,

it's time to shift to the next phase of the plan and reunite with the reinforcements that follow up the advance and claim any territory they can, allowing Tanya and her company to be relieved from supporting Colonel Lergen in the name of convenience.

Tanya moves quickly en route to her *target*. It is a point she marked to procure food and other provisions. She adds ham and cheese, coffee, white bread, and other luxury food and goods—all purchased with legal tender, of course—to her spoils of war.

The two companies for the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion return triumphantly with an assortment of goods as quickly as they can. It goes without saying that they are met with the grandest of welcomes from the military base upon their return. They bring with them their accomplishments, their spoils, and delicious food.

People can get lost at times. They lose their way, lose who they are, and can become greedy.

Having said that, there are also times when it is clear what must be done. This is one of those times for Tanya and her troops: They need to celebrate their victory. For worrying too much about war can cause great emotional anguish. It is a terrible thing to push oneself past one's mental limits.

What Tanya's soldiers need is the room to enjoy the bountiful culture boasted by Ildoa. It's the very reason that she puts so much emphasis on social and cultural values. She believes that what she and her troops do out on the front lines while at war—how they have to throw away their humanity—could make it hard for them to return to society after the war. There is a need to minimize the difference in mental stress when out on the front lines compared to life at the rear.

In terms of environment, Tanya loves Ildoa from the bottom of her heart. She loves it for the sunshine and its abundant agriculture. It is the complete opposite of the east: a pleasant place to be.

That goes for the people as well. Not yet tainted by endless total war, they are different than the Federalists. She truly loves the tranquility down here in the south.

What she enjoys most, however, *is a nice cup of coffee after a job well done*!

This is a wonderful blend. It tastes incredible. Even the short break she took before this celebration is enough to have her very excited.

"Everything is so wonderful here. Just look at the light; I could

sit here and sunbathe all day."

The coffee she abducted from the Ildoan Army is even better than the delicacies she found among the personal provisions distributed to the François Republic soldiers.

Oh, how wonderful neutrality must taste.

"It's almost too stimulating for me since I'm used to that drink they call coffee back in the Empire."

She busts out her personal chocolate stash to enjoy the excellent coffee. They say time flies when you're having fun… With tonight's big celebration starting soon, she has to rush to finish her lunch.

As soon as lunchtime is over, it's already almost nighttime. What turned out to be a fantastic lunch will be followed by a sumptuous feast for dinner. On the table before Tanya and her troops lies a smorgasbord, the likes of which Imperial soldiers could only dream of with how difficult it is to get decent food these days.

The spontaneous meal is a celebration to commemorate Tanya's troops' great work in their most recent operation.

"You've all done incredible work, comrades! Now, eat to your heart's content!"

She gives the word to start their meals…and yet, there isn't much of a reaction on the part of her soldiers.

The usually rambunctious soldiers all show her an expression that suggests *something's missing.*

Meat, cheese, ham, bread—this should be everything they need to enjoy themselves…

Her question is soon cleared by her adjutant, who raises her hand to express what it is they desire.

"Are we allowed to drink tonight?"

"Though it is only a formality, we could be called out to battle at any moment! I can't let you indulge yourselves too much."

Tanya knows her soldiers aren't so stupid as to get too drunk to operate, but she can't allow herself to forget a part of her duty as their manager is to take care of them.

Who in their right mind would ever approve of fighting a war with troops dulled by alcohol? It's an unnecessary risk she has no intention of making.

"First of all, is there even anyone here who needs to wash away their feelings with alcohol?"

The last thing Tanya wants to find out is what this bunch of warmongers is capable of under the influence.

She shoots her soldiers a glance, only to find wishful eyes staring back at her. Some of them are even so bold as to whisper complaints among themselves:

"The lieutenant colonel just doesn't understand." "We've already finished our part?!" "You gotta drink after a job well done." "Nah, we shouldn't expect someone who has never drank before to understand us." "We should at least hold a toast, even if just to round out a long day's work."

Tanya is shocked to realize just how much her soldiers want to drink. Allowing them to fly intoxicated could very well create a problem for her as their superior. She definitely doesn't want her career to suffer due to her subordinates' misbehavior.

She can already imagine her next job interview: *You have an extraordinary career behind you, but why on earth would you allow your subordinates to drink on the job?*

"Well, this comes a surprise to me. To think there are soldiers in the Imperial Army who can ignore rules and regulations when it's convenient for them."

Tanya shoots her soldiers another glance, and they all fall silent. She decides disciplinary action is necessary and calls out in a sharp tone:

"On the ground! I want twenty push-ups! Everyone, now! Follow my rhythm!"

Oh, how I absolutely detest joint responsibility.

The military's preference to employ such a concept always serves as a reminder that the military is an organization of necessary evils.

To top it all off, I can't give them orders to do push-ups while I sit back and watch. I almost want to cry. Doing twenty push-ups isn't all that difficult. I just despise the thought of having to bear the brunt of my subordinates' mistakes.

Let me say it again: I detest the idea of joint responsibility. A commanding officer must take responsibility for errors made by his or her subordinates. Tanya understands this…but she doesn't want her soldiers' drunkenness to fall on her shoulders. This is why, after her soldiers finish their punishment with a quick set of push-ups without breaking a sweat, Tanya sighs before them all and says:

"No drinking. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Their prompt, energetic response is satisfactory. If they're

willing to recognize the error of their ways while on the job, then this should be enough. What they do in their private lives is of no concern to Tanya.

Though, as their superior, she needs to bear in mind the work environment she creates for her soldiers. Being the outstanding middle manager she is, Tanya is courteous enough to soften the tone of punishment for her capable group of young soldiers with words of kindness.

"Is there anything else any of you wish for…?"

This is an earnest question for a superior to ask in a situation like this. Though, it usually isn't meant to be anything more than lip service in light of the fact that they can't drink. Nothing better than a cost-effective way to set a kinder tone… Tanya commends her own incredible social tact on the inside. *I've done it again!*

"What about chocolate and coffee?"

"Come again?"

Tanya realizes the grave error in judgment she's made when she hears her adjutants answer her question with an happy-go-lucky look about her. She is stricken with an overbearing sense of disbelief about the words she hears. This is a massive failure on my part—Tanya wishes that she could rewind the world just a few seconds back and cut her damn tongue off.

"You know, to celebrate the occasion… It would be nice if we could have some of yours…"

Her adjutant very politely asks this with a marked look of sorrow in her eyes. The new desire her adjutant revealed acts as the kindling for a searing flame of passion. Much to her chagrin, Tanya can see the fire growing around her.

It appears the alcoholics among her troops aren't the only ones starved for luxuries. She can pick out each sweet-toothed soldier among her ranks just by looking at them.

Look at the fire in their eyes! They burn with hope as they wait for me to agree with her suggestion!

The fact that my adjutant is well aware that I am very particular when it comes to my coffee and snacks would turn out to be a point of pain for me. For me to ask such a heedless question to begin with has me questioning whether a rational, economic person such as myself has fallen to Being X's level of stupidity.

The war is to blame for all this.

Now, setting all that aside, I can confirm my mental state later.

For now…I must deal with this.

What should I do? There's nothing to be gained from putting too much thought into this. I must make my decision now.

"…Damn it, all right. We can procure some from my personal stash!"

A reluctant Tanya writes this off as a necessary expense for her to maintain her airs of being a *good boss*.

For now, she won't forget the triumphant "Woo-hoo!" given by the sweet-toothed members of her battalion. Tanya makes a mental note of everyone who cheered. She is going to make sure they earn their chocolate during the next operation. They will *definitely* pay her back for this.

Swearing to get her chocolate's worth of work from the men and women, Tanya shoots her adjutant a look.

"You'll find what we need in my personal belongings. Bring back an appropriate amount. Don't be greedy, now, you hear?"

"Yes, commander! I'll be right back!"

There is no hesitation in my adjutant as she sprints out of the room. It appears she knows *exactly* where I keep my chocolate. I'm forced to prepare myself to lose most of what I've procured for myself this time. There isn't much left back in the Empire, so hopefully, I'll be able to procure more while we're here in Ildoa.

For the time being, I'll have to enjoy the feast we've prepared for tonight.

With my knife and fork—my two favorite armaments—I dig into the appetizer, fish, and then the main dish. My heart is filled with joy as I savor the exquisite Ildoan cuisine. *Now this is what culture is supposed to taste like!*

I become overcome with a sense of dizziness when I see my adjutant make her way back with copious amounts of my chocolate and coffee, but I maintain my composure on the outside with a smile. It is thanks to my calm that my ears perk up at the sound of busy footsteps I assume are hurrying to serve me my next dish.

"Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff, where's Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff?"

"I'm right here."

With a fork in hand, Tanya glances over at the bold server who called her by name. How strange, the waiter doesn't appear to have anything in his hands.

No, I've seen this person before. They're a facilities staff officer. I

want to ask why he would call for me without carrying any food. He seems to be a second lieutenant. Is he an officer?

Judging by his age, he is a second lieutenant, fresh out of war college. He must be here to supplement our lack of personnel. I suppose his youth and lack of experience aren't a problem if he is kept in the rear… Nevertheless, the drop in average age for the Imperial Army is glaring. Between this and an aging population, I wonder which is worse.

With this on her mind, Tanya opts to answer the young officer as if she is speaking with a child.

"I didn't hear an alarm. What do you need?"

Though these words are meant to criticize the young man, Tanya makes sure not to be too strict. With a blend of displeasure and confusion in her tone, she makes sure to pay respect to the young officer's duty.

"I'd like it if we could enjoy a meal in peace after completing a mission."

The second lieutenant shows a sorrowful look before blurting out his response, as if he suddenly remembered what he's here for.

"It's a call from the Empire! I'm sorry, but you need to take it!"

"What? Well, I suppose I probably should."

Tanya sighs, puts down her knife and fork, and gets out of her seat. Having to leave the dinner is very regrettable, but she can't ignore a call from the capital.

"By the way, Second Lieutenant. I'd appreciate it if you made it a point to tell me who is calling next time."

"My apologies. It's an urgent call from General Zettour."

Hey! Tanya's attitude immediately stiffens when she hears the word *general*. This level of awareness is abysmal, even for a new officer. It's worse than poor training.

Tanya is forced to point out the problem to the young officer with a deep sigh.

"Remember this: Never forget to add the word *urgent* to your initial report when pertinent. An improper report can have grave consequences."

He has the worst person in all of the army to keep waiting on hold! Tanya darts to the room where the phone has been left on hold and, after scrambling to pick it up, apologizes for her tardiness.

"This is Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff! I'm so sorry to keep

you waiting, General!"

Time is a precious resource. That goes double for a superior's time, but there's no use in making excuses when you've screwed up. Even if it was the messenger's mistake, one must start by giving an earnest apology, and it needs to be done as soon as possible—every second counts when you are running late.

"There's no need to worry, Lieutenant Colonel. There is just a little something I need for you to do."

Tanya can hear the grin on her superior's face through the phone. A grin wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing if it weren't *Deputy Director Zettour*, known for his cunning tricks, on the phone.

"What is it that you need me to do?"

"Yes, well, I have good news and bad news."

Whenever given this choice, Tanya always opts to start with the worse news.

"May I hear the bad news first?"

"The Ildoan Navy has battleships positioned on the coast that may pose a significant threat to our plans. There is a good chance they may be capable of completely denying us use of their coastline roads."

Battleships can bring incredible firepower to bear. The measly twenty-millimeter shells fired by artillery on the ground pale in comparison to the forty-centimeter shells the floating fortresses can hurl one after the other.

"They are going to bombard their own roads with battleships? How bothersome."

"Quite so. Our forces on the road are at a loss at the moment. The most I can come up with to fight back is to try and keep their movement limited via sea mines."

"You said you had good news as well?"

"That is correct. Though enemy battleships pose a clear threat…their emergence also provides us with a new chance."

"A chance?"

Tanya is suspicious of the general's suggestive terminology. The fact that General Zettour sounds markedly happy is also a bit disturbing. She can't tell if what is coming next will be a good or bad thing…but one thing's for sure: The danger sense she cultivated in the east tells her that something is off.

"The enemy fleet appears to be vulnerable to an attack that could wipe them out in one hit."

"…My apologies, but that sounds a bit too good to be true to me, General. If it were one or two ships, I could understand taking them out in a single attack, but an entire fleet?"

Is he talking about taking out a fully loaded carrier? That doesn't seem feasible given how tied up the Imperial Army is at the moment. To make matters worse, the war started on the 11th. Today is the 16th. Would the enemy deliberately roll out such a vulnerable target five days into the war?

Tanya's firm grasp of military logic has her confused by the premise at hand.

"I bet you don't believe me, and I wouldn't blame you. But it is the truth. You see," General Zettour happily continues, "the main fleet for the Ildoan naval forces is currently…undergoing modernization refitting in a port to the north."

"…What?"

Are they rebuilding their ships—precious national assets—on the border?

"So this means that they aren't able to deploy any of their ships at the moment?"

"That's exactly right. Their behemoths are currently immobile, and a battleship trapped in a harbor is the perfect target."

"I can hardly believe it. There is a war going on. Are the Ildoans sane?"

Their most expensive targets are just sitting on their border, waiting for an Imperial attack. Who in their right mind would ever allow such a thing to happen?

"The Ildoans follow a different school of thought. They likely intended to have their ships there as a message that they had no intent to start a war. It's a rational choice to make from their standpoint."

Tanya agrees with this point. They would never *start* a war while all their ships were in a single dock. Such would be utterly inconceivable—for an Imperial soldier. It appears the Ildoans thought the exact opposite.

Look at us. We're neutral. We have no intention of attacking the Empire.

Docking their battleships on their border was meant to be a signal to the Empire. Unfortunately for them, the Empire didn't pick up on their signal in time.

"So…their entire fleet is still docked at the border?"

“They weren’t ready to fight a war, nor did they have any contingencies put in place. They are currently rushing to get their ships out of the harbor. This is just another of the unforeseen benefits of our ambush.”

Picking up on the incredible opportunity, Tanya makes her move.

“This means our army can seize their ships!”

The Empire’s naval situation is in dire straits. If there is any chance to improve it, they should do whatever it takes. Even if this wasn’t the case and their navy was in good shape, a new battleship or two always carries with it a significant impact. Although Tanya doesn’t necessarily consider battleships the *king of the seas*…the *public* absolutely adores them. Almost too much. Seizing any number of battleships would be the best form of propaganda one could wish for.

As such, a rosy dream blossoms in Tanya’s mind.

So that is what he means by taking them out all at once! How simple!

“That won’t likely be possible.”

General Zettour quietly yet firmly plucks the petals of the roses in Tanya’s dream.

“I don’t think we should let this chance to seize new ships slip through our fingers…”

“It’s not good to wish for what you don’t have. The assault on Ildoa’s northern territory is still midway. We are currently walking on an extremely thin tightrope.”

Their main forces are currently in the phase where they move south and open up a path. This is the natural response for a superior to make when considering how unpredictable the battlefield is.

If only… Tanya couldn’t stop a feeling of lament from welling up inside.

“If only we had more forces…”

“We lack the manpower and time. Our only hope is to sink what is there. We can’t let our desire get in the way of a successful attack.”

Everyone wants as much precious resources as they can acquire. This is especially true in times of war. The only difference between times of war and peace in this regard is that the resources you *cannot* have become a *nuisance*—and if we can’t have them, then we’ll destroy them.

Coming to this inevitable logical conclusion, Tanya gives up on the thought of acquiring more ships.

"So I'm assuming our air fleet will be attacking the enemy naval fleet?"

"Our air fleet is currently struggling to maintain aerial superiority in the north. There's no guarantee we could sink all the ships, even if we used them to attack the port."

Tanya doesn't quite follow. Perhaps we will do something similar to the attack on Port Arthur in China, meaning sieging the port with either heavy artillery that we can bring up or railway guns. Considering the durability of the battleships, I assume we'll be using the railway guns.

"General, I think I see what you're getting at."

The 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion would act as artillery observers during the siege on the port. I can't help but note the irony if there is a 203 Hill in Ildoa like there is in China. This will be exactly like Port Arthur if we use railway guns to blow apart their battleships from afar.

"Leave the attack to my battalion. We're used to spotting for artillery crews."

Tanya says this confidently, but it isn't easy to guide artillery fire in enemy territory. It is a significant hurdle to overcome. That said, it should be different from the support they needed to give to single artillerists in Norden or the Rhine. This time, several different approaches can be taken.

As Tanya thinks about observation tactics and the equipment they will need, she is hit with some unexpected words.

"I appreciate the enthusiasm, but I won't be having you guide the attack."

"What?"

"The Doctor will explain the details to you. You and your battalion will be attacking the enemy ships."

"D-did you say *Doctor*?"

An alarm begins ringing loudly in Tanya's mind.

Shit. This is worse news than the original bad news. Fucking shit.

"I've made the arrangements to use his acceleration machinery. I want you to conduct more *reconnaissance*."

No! Not those damned missiles we used to visit the François Republic on the Rhine front!

"G-General. My units have just finished a long battle; I'm not so

certain that we can operate at full capacity yet…"

I need to talk my way out of this. Despite my desperate attempts to list any excuse, reason, or factor I can think of, Tanya's superior has a ruthless retort ready.

"That's odd. Just a moment ago you were volunteering to spot artillery fire on the naval base."

She can't lie. With any false response likely to be seen right through, Tanya's only option is to somehow use the truth to make her superior misunderstand the situation… Unfortunately, General Zettour may very well be the man with the most expertise in employing this tactic in the entire world.

Therefore, Tanya realizes her only option is to raise her white flag now.

"O-on your orders, sir."

What is supposed to be a joyous feast and celebration for the members of the 203rd is immediately stopped by the awful sound of an *alarm*. It isn't an actual alarm but an internal one, triggered by the sound of hurried footsteps their heightened senses pick up on while they wait for their commander to return. The two elite companies of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion all hear the internal alarm in unison and begin to stuff their faces with the food accordingly.

This attribute of theirs makes for strong soldiers who will survive the war. They need to eat when the food is there.

These veterans, who are in a league of their own, know instinctually to reach for whatever food they can grab and shove it down their throats ASAP.

"Mmnngh, hey! That's mine!" "First Lieutenant! Look at all that cheese you ate already! Save some for the rest of us!" "I wanted to make it into a sandwich and save it for later!" "Who took a bite out of my chocolate?!" "This white bread tastes so damn good…"

There is a strange harmony to the busy hands that reach for food, slap each other away, and grab things that can be saved for later as the grand feast quickly disappears into the soldiers' stomachs and satchels.

Being an Aerial Mage is a calorie-intensive position, and eating is an essential part of it—but their focus is in shambles. They must

maintain a technical capacity to pick up on subtle changes to their surroundings. Such as, say, their commander stomping back down the hall in frustration.

That being said, a soldier can only remain so vigilant. The moment Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff catches a glimpse of what's going on in the banquet room, she—in a manner that explains how a White Silver Badge holder can earn the moniker Rusted Silver—glares balefully as she calls out to her battalion.

"Attention, all units! Assemble at once!"

Despite the veteran mage and war hero she is, Viktoriya Ivanovna Serebryakov almost chokes on the oversized bite of ham sandwich she forced down her throat.

"Mrgh?! Mmm, *cough*, huh? What?!"

Tanya's tone, her presence, and her words—a veteran in the middle of a raging battle doesn't need to be able to see the future to know what is coming with a probability of nearly 100 percent. Whatever it is this time, it is most certainly bad.

They all can tell they're about to be embroiled in something troublesome. For a veteran with First Lieutenant Serebryakov's ample experience, she assumes the worst and immediately kicks into high gear. The only problem is—it's her hands and mouth that are moving.

"All units of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion! Prepare to deploy!"

"But we just finished our last mission?!"

My subordinate protests my orders while she engulfs what is likely the most delicious white bread she's ever had. It's not as if our usual rye bread doesn't taste good, but fine-grain white bread is in a league of its own.

"You heard me!"

"W-wait, wait! Let me finish this first!"

One of my soldiers shouts this out as they wash down more white bread with some of my coffee.

It's hard even to imagine drinking coffee of this caliber in such a crude manner. Thinking about how much the coffee cost is almost enough to make me faint. That said, it seems the majority of my subordinates are more interested in the bread than the coffee.

Some of the bread has delicious meat sandwiched between it. Though there isn't enough time to enjoy the taste, it's still leagues better than the provisions they're used to.

It must taste wonderful. To eat it in such a way is a true disservice to its quality, but it is better than letting it go to waste. My subordinates keep eating and eating, reaching for more food as I wait.

“Cease eating the Ildoan cuisine at once! I need you to assemble this instant! You know what will happen if you don’t!”

It’s clear to them that I am nearing my limits as I finish my demand with an overt tone of frustration. They have all been in the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion for a long time now, so they know where the line they mustn’t cross lies. Nevertheless, First Lieutenant Serebryakov tries to resist once more.

“P-please let us have the calories we need for our next operation…!”

I shoot her the coldest of glares while simultaneously saying, in an almost kind tone…

“First Lieutenant Serebryakov. Are you asserting your need to eat takes priority over your commander’s orders?”

This is the limit. They can hear my rage simmering over the boiling point.

Realizing she has screwed up, First Lieutenant Serebryakov scrambles to put out the flames she has inadvertently fanned.

“Oh, no! No, no, no, no! I’m ready to deploy this very instant!”

She shoots up out of her chair and begins grabbing things off the table, beckoning another glare of disbelief from Tanya.

“Oi, Visha.”

“Yes!”

“Put the biscuits down.”

At the peak of desperation, First Lieutenant Serebryakov retorts:

“These are emergency rations!”

Her expression is full of confidence. This assertion might have worked on a different superior if it weren’t for the length of their relationship.

“You have a bunch of my chocolate on you as well, don’t you?”

“The chocolate and these biscuits are entirely separate issues!”

“Fine! Fine! Just make sure you enjoy the taste of my coffee while you drink it.”

“Y-y-yes, Commander!”

First Lieutenant Serebryakov shuffles over to where the rest of

the mages are eating and promptly picks up enough coffee for her and Tanya to have later. It's obvious what this is for. They are going to enjoy it while they have their next meeting.

Thus, in line with Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff's desire to have a meeting in comfort, the meeting room they use is well stocked with chocolate and coffee. The fragrant scent of coffee beans fills the meeting room where they receive an impassioned explanation from Dr. Schugel about his new and improved V-1s.

The members of the mage battalion ignore the fragrance as their commanding officer begins her own explanation of the operation they're about to commit. A simple explanation would more than suffice for the battle-hardened mage troops, who have already successfully executed operations using the V-1s and V-2s.

"Our target is a group of enemy battleships. That will be all."

With clear comprehension, the mage troops all approach to board the mad scientist's contraptions. We're boarding the latest rendition of the Doctor's V-1s from a launch facility that was prepared in a hurry. Although, the only one professing the improvements to a core feature of the missiles is Dr. Schugel himself. From Tanya's point of view, a V-1 that can now turn slightly more on its axis is still the same old V-1 they're used to.

The twelve pilots propel themselves through the blue Ildoan skies riding a jet stream of hydrazine fuel. Inside the steel death trap, Tanya and her veterans make small adjustments to their trajectories as they fly through the air.

The speed of the V-1s is as intense as ever as they thrash through the sky on course for their target. At this rate, their enemies will have zero time to react before they complete their mission. We must bear in mind, however, that the Ildoan Army is not the François Army. In other words, the former isn't in a position where they will be idly waiting for the attack to come to them.

Ildoa is a late contender to join this war. For better or worse, they have extensive knowledge of the Imperial Army's capacity to perform decapitation strikes after watching from the sidelines for all this time. This may be an advantage to neutrality. They still have the resources and budget to remain aware of their enemy's strengths. The Ildoan military stationed in the Empire and the Commonwealth are even in the position to explore tactics from both perspectives when it comes to fighting the Empire.

Though both perspectives are incomplete, it is more than

adequate to make a blueprint they can base their *scenarios* on. It is yet to be determined whether or not their plans will be effective in actual combat, though. Nevertheless, the fact of the matter is that they will have a contingency plan in place.

Accordingly, it is clear what the soldiers at the naval base must do. Their garrison need not hesitate. As soon as news of the attack makes its way from the border, the naval garrison will quickly take up positions to defend the base.

They have the equipment and the people, and are up against an enemy they prepared for. The Ildoan Navy moves as quickly as possible according to the contingency plans they had set up for an attack like this. This evidently involves unleashing every bit of anti–air fire they can muster: a tactic as effective as it is simple.

A dense curtain of enemy fire heading our way presents itself to Tanya, leaving her in shock.

"We're not even close yet?"

What shocks her the most is the distance from which they are firing. It isn't a distance from which antiair missiles could be fired effectively. Normally, Tanya would laugh this off as hysteria. However, there is nothing about the situation unfolding before her to laugh at.

"I see… They're trying to block our vision."

The density of their antiair curtain fire itself is just sparse enough for Tanya and her troops to penetrate it. This much, however, is exactly what the enemy is hoping for, as the black smoke unleashed by their antiair missiles is making it exponentially more difficult to see past them.

As frustrating as this may be, the black smoke makes it apparent that the soldiers defending the harbor will hit us with everything they have.

The destroyers appear to be letting up a smokescreen as well. I'm not sure how much they intend on pushing the boilers on their ships, but their tactic is terribly effective.

At this rate, we won't be able to see anything.

"Those damned Ildoans! They're clever bastards!"

It is difficult to make slight adjustments to the V-1's final trajectory. Any small shift has a huge impact on the spot where a missile like this will land. The tactic employed by the Ildoan Navy is the perfect way to defend against them. This is exactly what the Empire would do in the same circumstances.

“Perhaps we underestimated our opponent due to their many years of peace…”

A part of her didn’t expect much of a challenge for this operation due to their lack of experience. Maybe how they annihilated their army in the initial charge played a role in her misjudgment.

Tanya needs to accept that she has made a mistake. Thinking back on it, the nation of Ildoa is, after all, a maritime nation. Just as the Commonwealth’s navy is a great threat despite their dismal army, naval officers who live off their seamanship are as cunning as they come.

I always find myself envious of that which I cannot have.

“Shit, this is why I despise the navy.”

The Empire’s navy is so unreliable compared to all of their enemies. This is a nasty imbalance to work with. It is entirely unfair.

I wish my nation’s navy would reflect on their own practices more. Everyone but our submarines are pretty much a waste of fuel. I almost want to rip the seals off their boats and send them to the east as foot soldiers. Maybe that would whip them into shape a bit!

Tanya swallows her agitation and begins thinking about the matter at hand.

“I should worry about myself rather than others…”

This smokescreen is unexpected. There are only twelve V-1s on our side. Our numbers are far too low to spread out and hope we can reach our targets through their curtain fire. If my units can’t land their shots, there isn’t much to be gained from this operation.

Wait. Why do we need to land them all? It’s an absurd expectation to have to begin with. We’re not so foolish as to believe in a reality where such a convenient attack could ever prove successful.

We’re a company of veterans; there’s no way we could ever expect to all land our shots perfectly… I doubt we’ll be able to sink all five of their ships. Even if our missiles strike true, there’s a chance they are too sturdy to be sunk.

On that note, a new idea crosses Tanya’s mind: The 203rd may as well aim for one or two for now.

The smokescreen won’t allow them to hope for much more. With the wall of flak and the smokescreen, it’s evident we should’ve considered a few more options before we deployed.

That said, though, our current plan is already set in motion.

"Would last-minute changes to the plan be a bad thing?"

There are moments in life where one must opt for the second-best plan if it is more reliable, given any confusion that may prevent optimal execution of the original plan.

At the same time, orders aren't something that should be changed on a whim. If we mess up by propelling ourselves into a curtain of utter confusion, the damages we'll suffer will be far too great.

What will happen if we mess up? Will there even be a next time? I mean, it's not as if I actually want to use these V-1s again, but this is something that needs to be considered from an occupational standpoint.

What is clear to me now is how limited this opportunity is. If the enemy ships make it out to sea, the V-1s will be of no effect. Maybe we could try again with the V-2s, but I doubt anything will work if they know we are coming for them.

"The answer to all of this is simple, I guess."

It's enough to have Tanya give a wry grin. We need to remove our enemies while we have the chance. That is all that matters. So they can't let this opportunity pass us by.

Instead of trying to change our course, we will make sure to sink at least one or two battleships.

"There's just one problem."

And it is a big problem. These V-1s are creations of that mad scientist. Is it really okay for Tanya and her soldiers to risk their lives on these death traps?

For better or worse, however, the answer to her concerns has already been forced upon her.

"There's no turning back now that we've come this far."

Tanya never wanted to use these contraptions, of course. But her superior made the decision—to put her life on the line—for her. With orders this clear, there's no choice but to trust that damned mad scientist.

It was never Tanya's decision to make from the beginning.

Orders are orders.

"What a crock of shit."

It's a terrible thing to have to work for someone else. Now that she has decided to change jobs, she definitely can't do anything that would put her in front of a firing squad.

“I sure as hell never thought they would put me back on one of these, though…”

She shakes her head to rid herself of any distracting thoughts. Right now, she needs to focus on ramming this flying heap of metal into one of the enemy’s floating heaps of metal. Setting aside how dangerous the V-1s are, one thing’s for sure: They definitely pack a punch.

With our vision hampered, the 203rd will need to focus on driving them manually.

“01 to all units. We’re going to move according to plan.”

This is why Tanya speaks to her subordinates as they approach their target in their sights.

“Ideally, we hit them with a direct attack, but just try to get as close as you can. If possible, aim for their propellers!”

A battleship is still very dangerous even if it can’t move. That said, it certainly isn’t as dangerous as a battleship that *can* move. The Empire needs the Ildoan Navy to lose their assets today.

“Comrades, I place great faith in you all. Get results like you always do! That is all!”

A superior’s speech should always be quick and to the point. After sending a brief message out to her soldiers, Tanya turns her radio to her adjutant’s channel.

“Adjutant! We’re following the initial formation. You and I will take out the battleship farthest to the rear!”

“Roger!”

I should check the hydrazine boosters. They appear to be working perfectly. Maintaining our astonishing velocity, we pierce through the air toward our target. We come pouring down like flying balls of destruction that will soon pay a little visit to the battleships parked in the harbor below.

Our enemy, on the other hand, is doing everything they can to bring a quick end to our visit. The enemy forces on the ground are launching literally everything they have at our quickly approaching V-1s. They begin adding aimed shots into the initial curtain of flak that bars the 203rd’s way.

“The Ildoan Navy is good… Though it’s clear that they lack experience, they are able to move as a team.”

Tanya nods at her adjutant’s comment.

“It makes me jealous.”

Their navy is thoroughly trained and educated. The forces

below them are likely the most well-equipped among any of the warring powers at the moment. If the troops below are as well trained as they are armed, they are something to be desired by every branch of the Imperial military.

The Empire doesn't want to be up against a power that doesn't operate the same way it does—like a sweatshop. It's dreadful how properly functioning companies can extend their efficiency to personnel at even the lowest levels. Tanya must recognize her enemy's advantage. That being said, she will also make sure that their experience will pull out above all else for this battle. This advantage of theirs is something they will have to use to its fullest extent.

"There is no need for us to give these soldiers the experience they lack."

"I agree."

Tanya begins to make the final adjustments to her flight path as she listens to her adjutant's reply. The smoke that blocks their vision is very annoying, but it's a tactic that they're used to.

"Their battleships are ours."

Our target: the entire Ildoan naval fleet.

After we make our final adjustments, my soldiers and I all eject from our V-1 cockpits. As the missiles plunge toward the deep blue Ildoan sea, Tanya and her mages successfully distance themselves from the blast by taking flight. They turn their attention to the skies above the naval port, which are still as filled with projectiles as they were only moments before. The Ildoan Navy continues to launch everything they've got at the 203rd in the form of AA fire.

To make things worse, it seems a few of their enemies have made visual confirmation of them.

"How annoying!"

They are going so far as to focus the line of their anti–air fire on individual mages. It is, of course, not enough to put any of my mages in danger thanks to our protective films and defensive shells. Nevertheless, it is never a pleasant experience to be under this much withering fire. Save a handful of soldiers with a particular fetish for being caught in enemy scopes, this is about as stressful as a war can get.

"I won't deny another person's desires, but I certainly don't share those peculiar interests… Oh?"

From the corner of her eye, Tanya sees the sparkle of a mad

weapon, the mad product of a mad scientist's mad passion.

Their vehicular missiles, with their highly penetrative design, ample thrust, and decent explosive power, show as little restraint as their creator as they head directly for their targets.

This is, after all, what he made them for, and they do what they are made for well.

The Imperial-made V-1s pierce through Ildoa's blue sky, blue sea, and gray battleships that race to depart from the harbor in twelve straight lines.

The resulting sight is utter calamity. No amount of smoke could hide what happens. Six of the V-1s land direct hits. Four more are near hits.

The aftermath of the attack is outstanding.

As the ships have yet to leave the port, they cannot make any real evasive maneuvers. A vessel stuck in harbor makes for a great target. This is even truer for the elite 203rd—this is the ideal environment to create results.

The single mage company hits its mark on two battleships and even manages to tip over a third. The explosion is incredible. The sound of the blast rumbles through the sky, the shock wave of which is enough to shake the aerial mages' formation. I look out at the bay with satisfaction. It's easy to see the impact of the blast.

Of the Ildoan naval fleet, all that's left are two of their more elite ships—and even those are barely staying afloat…

"I believe it's fair to say we've incapacitated them."

We have taken away their mobility. The boats are either on their way to the bottom of the sea or in the process of tipping over.

No one can tell the future, but one thing is for sure.

"They're not going anywhere with their boats in that shape."

In one fell swoop, we have eliminated the naval fleet boasted by the Ildoans. Their boats certainly won't be seeing any battle in this war.

The thick black smoke billowing up from the burning flames below tell Tanya this much.

Three boats have sunk, and two have been destroyed. The masses of steel will rot in the blue Ildoan ocean, now stained black by the diesel fuel. The black smoke that blocked their vision until just moments ago is now a brilliant display of various colors as the smoke catches the light from the magnificent flames of the enemy ships!

Before long, the company has quickly finished regrouping in the skies above. The fact that there was no trouble ejecting from the V-1s is great news.

This is a flawless victory, made without suffering any losses.

"Should we capitalize on our results?"

From my side, I hear my adjutant give her opinion. As of late, she has a tendency to want to pick on our weaker enemies. In moments like these, Tanya worries a little about the woman's future.

"First Lieutenant, it's times like these where I feel the need to remind you…not to forget we are at war."

Knowing when to quit is an essential part of being a professional soldier.

Why doesn't she realize that the weakness the enemy is showing right now makes for the perfect chance to return home on time? Could it be that First Lieutenant Serebryakov finds her work so fulfilling she can continue without limits?

"First Lieutenant, do you find our work fulfilling?"

"Huh? Are you talking about fulfilling our duty?"

My subordinate takes a defensive stance. This is the right reaction to have. A superior questioning their subordinate's desires is generally unwelcome. As much as I'd like her to relax the tension in her shoulders, it's not that easy, even for somebody as good at communication as I.

"Hm…" After a moment's thought, I ask her again nonchalantly. "Oh, no. I was just wondering if you are the type who wishes to find fulfillment in their work. That's all."

I am slightly worried whether this will come across the way I wish for it to. I can tell, though, from my subordinate's expression that Tanya's words reach her.

"Well, uh, I guess it is better if there is some…"

"Thank you, Visha."

That sounds normal. Maybe her tendency to seek out fulfillment is only slight, at most. She is likely a standard person. Tanya, for one, enjoys a fulfilling job much more than a fruitless one. This much is a part of life.

"All units, withdraw! We've completed our mission to perfection! Let's finish it without suffering any losses!"

It's time for our great escape. There aren't many forces that can escape as quickly as the veterans of the 203rd Aerial Mage

Battalion. We hightail it out of there so fast, it's clear to anyone on the ground that we aren't the type to loiter in enemy skies any longer than we need to.

The aerial company partakes in clever banter as we fly back to our base, though we never let our guard down. With no unnecessary movements made up until the very end, Tanya nods with satisfaction upon returning to the base.

"Good work, everyone! You're all dismissed," Tanya says before turning to her adjutant and realizing she should probably extend her personal appreciation to her as well.

"The same goes for you, Adjutant. You did well today."

"Thank you. So… Colonel, where will we be going next?"

"Hm? Ah, we're going to change our location."

"To where?"

This much is a given.

To the front, obviously.

Tanya is already smiling.

"It's about time we head to the front to act as the rear guard for Weiss and the others."

"Uh… W-we're going to go to the front even though we just blew up all those destroyers?"

We're still not finished? Although Tanya's adjutant just barely manages to swallow her words, it is clear what she is getting at.

They cleaned up the battlefield for Colonel Lergen and destroyed an entire enemy naval fleet. Looking back on how they've been moving these past few days, it's clear that they are being overworked.

Oh, how I miss the Department of Labor Standards. Alas, one shouldn't lament what they can't have. No amount of labor standards would protect an Imperial soldier anyway.

That is why we need to go forward—it is for our own good. The longer we stay back on reserve, the more likely we'll be hit with another dangerous assignment.

Staying in the rear is high risk and high return. Tanya would much rather take her chances with middle risk, middle return at the rear of the front lines. Not to mention that there isn't a soul in the Empire who would dare call heading to the front lines "running away from the battle." Therefore, from a risk-hedge point of view, there is no reason for them not to head to the front.

"I understand your concerns, Adjutant, but the Kampfgruppe

needs all the support it can get."

"Considering the circumstances, I can't disagree…"

"As you shouldn't. There is no time for us to waste eating a free meal at the rear."

Tanya's words are met with an unexpected reaction.

"Um, could it be that you're still…?"

"What's that, Adjutant?"

"Are you still angry?"

Angry? Me? This troubles Tanya, who gives a candid response.

"Angry at what?"

"About the ham before we deployed…"

"The ham you stuffed between your cheeks? I'm not so petty as to hold a grudge over some ham that I didn't get to eat because somebody got there first."

NOVEMBER 19, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, IMPERIAL OCCUPIED TERRITORY

Setting aside the political and military implications behind the Ildoan campaign, the front lines of Ildoa are a delicious place to fight.

I'm not talking about just the ham or cheese.

Tanya's sharp eye catches every imported coffee bean there is to find. There are even some fun machines for us to take home, like this device for grinding coffee. I'm looking forward to being able to enjoy espresso whenever I wish. An espresso machine would be easier to work with, but they don't have those in this world yet.

I think I'll take a stroll through our new territory and buy what I need.

Legally, of course.

Tanya is insistent that her subordinates also follow this policy as it is much more rational—and safe—for them to systematically commandeer their goods rather than pillage them. It's also legal for them to do it this way.

"First Lieutenant Serebryakov, prepare some Commonwealth currency for me to use later."

"Are you going to purchase something?"

“That is correct.”

Foreign currency is a strong asset in enemy territories. People place far more trust in it compared to military currency. I should mention that we acquired all of the currency we use for shopping from enemy coffers. It is pretty easy to come by when raiding an enemy base (though I doubt my colleagues in other branches of the army would try to do the same). Setting aside the times when we are engaged in fierce combat, it is always a powerful tool for acquiring goods on the front lines.

Sun Tzu put it the best. A wise general sources what they need from their enemy. *One cartload of the enemy’s provisions is worth twenty of one’s own.* He was probably a genius manager. He’s much better than Marx in terms of his awareness of costs.

“We’ll start with recon. Let’s go.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“All right.”

As the two of us walk through occupied territory, part of the scenery sticks out like a sore thumb. We’d notice it even if we weren’t on reconnaissance.

“Everything here is so pretty, unlike the Empire.”

“Excluding the parts we destroyed.”

As my adjutant points out, the blemish on the scenery is the remains of broken-down buildings and houses. It’s fair to conclude that the Empire is at fault for the lion’s share of the wreckage.

The more recent damages tend to be made by bullets, after all.

“Our ground troops really don’t hold back now, do they? Perhaps the Ildoans are a bit too sophisticated in this regard.”

The majority of the enemy forces retreated without so much as blowing up a bridge behind them. Though, the word is there was an exception who had what it takes to do so. I hear that there is a specific spot that was scorched so badly that it looks like it was a Federation job. Fortunately for us, such decisive action is still limited. Most Ildoans even appear to operate as if things are still business as usual.

They don’t care if it is the Empire, the Federation, or the Commonwealth that attacks them. I can’t think of a single country that would allow their roads to be taken unscathed. In this regard, Ildoa is still quite peaceful.

“The fact that they’re hesitant to destroy their roads shows that they just aren’t cut out for war.”

“It’s not as if…”

My adjutant timidly motions to share her opinion with me.

“…We destroy what’s in our path because we wanted to.”

Tanya agrees with her about this.

“That is correct. We are ordered to do so by necessity.”

There is one question that remains unanswered. I wonder if the Goddess of Necessity truly is a goddess. It’s an important perspective and a deep question of Tanya’s.

As far as Tanya can tell, the fact that those like Being X have left this world to its own devices is the source of many of its problems. It’s too difficult to understand even with the just-world hypothesis.

Despite how much I must suffer, why do I receive so little in return? There is no salvation for the human race so long as this question goes unanswered.

Tanya casually reaches for something in her pocket.

“Visha, take a look at this.”

“Oh? What is that?”

“It is a potato. A single potato.”

It is a bit too small and misshapen to call it a proper potato. And yet, this here is a potato nonetheless.

It is the basics of the basics for a soldier to grab what they can and shove it in their pockets before deploying on another mission. This is because you never know when will be the next time you’ll be able to get the provisions you need.

Seeing the look of suspicion on First Lieutenant Serebryakov’s face, Tanya nods.

“I guess it is strange that I am carrying around a potato, isn’t it?”

“Well, I was expecting you’d have a chocolate bar. Considering how much you like them.”

“That’s not incorrect.”

Tanya rolls the potato around in her palm and shows a bit of a wry smile.

“I figured this is a good chance to compare the size of our potatoes with Ildoa’s. I picked out a random one from our base.”

I probably shouldn’t be surprised that it took using my authority as a General Staff Aerial Magic Battalion commander to acquire a potato even as paltry as this one. It’s not worth mentioning this to my adjutant, but this lieutenant colonel—a

celebrated Named, Aerial Magic officer, and member of the General Staff Office—had to seriously negotiate for this measly potato.

Nonetheless, I opt not to compare the tiny vegetable to its Ildoan counterpart.

"I wanted to compare it to the potatoes here, but I decided to stop myself."

"Why did you decide to do that?"

This much is obvious. How can she not see it? Tanya sighs before sharing their unpleasant reality with her adjutant.

"Because I knew it would only make me sad, Adjutant."

The potatoes I found in Ildoa are genuinely magnificent. It's enough to make one question if they are even the same vegetable. Their color, size, and weight are completely different. You can feel how much nutrition is packed in their potatoes just by holding them. The Empire's potatoes are so thin and seedy in comparison.

To think these are considered an Imperial staple. The poison of total war has thoroughly eaten away at the Empire's foundation.

"We were ordered to come here by the Goddess of Necessity."

There is nothing left for the Empire but our own destruction as we tread the bleary path laid out for us. Fate is always so cruel. As such, General Zettour decided to try and throw shit at the fate handed to him and depart from it.

As far as Tanya knows, the man known as Zettour is, as an individual, likely as good and pious a man of faith as anybody else is…but as a part of this organization, he is a wicked realist. He would probably go so far as to not let what most would consider a god stand in his way. Anything that crosses his path and stands in his way is met with destruction. This means that if the Goddess of Necessity decided to forsake the Empire, then the Deputy Director of the Service Corps in the General Staff would respond with a giant middle finger.

He will show no mercy, even for a god.

Ironically enough, if it would result in the Empire being able to avoid the *path to our own destruction*, General von Zettour would bow down before any god, sardine, or even Flying Spaghetti Monster.

That's right, we are approaching the end. This is the path General von Zettour is taking, a path to end the war. Without beating around the bush, our current operation is a hard-landing attempt for the *best loss* we can eke out.

In other words, it's the end for the Empire. Everything we do now is in search of a means to our end.

The measures we've taken in Ildoa provide us with nothing more than a bit of time. General von Zettour is likely going to try and use this to bring an end to hostilities in the east. He'll either get rid of the Empire's remaining resources or discard them as a way to adjust our debts. That is, assuming there's any logic to what he is doing…

Either way, Tanya can't speak as to whether or not her theory is correct. A part of Tanya is a bit conflicted about all of this. Her instincts tell her that General Zettour has more intentions behind the Ildoan campaign than he is letting on as a *military operation*.

If it is a political campaign, it's hard to tell exactly what his goals are. I'm sure there is something political going on here—something about all of this reeks of concealment. I'm not sure based on physical evidence, but Tanya's intuition is picking up on *something*.

There has to be something for the Empire to gain from attacking Ildoa. Until I can figure out what that is, I'm nothing more than a pawn for the general to play around with. I must continue playing the role of a capable pawn, but a pawn also needs to think for itself. If I'm unable to decide my own price, there is a good chance I may get *pawned* off against my will. I need to make arrangements to remain vigilant to any adjustments such as these. My network and personal connections will remain important from here on out.

I glance over at my adjutant. I also wish to bear in mind the careers of my subordinates to the best of my abilities. If I can, I'd like to sell them off all at once, with me as their manager for added value, as a set…but I wonder who would buy such a package.

We're definitely not going to become Communists, which I suppose leaves us with the capitalists. Capitalists can be convinced with profits, although that isn't to say the Commies don't have political interests of their own. A Commie is still a Commie at the end of the day. For a highly civilized and cultured citizen such as Tanya, there won't be much breathing room for her without a proper market.

If she is going to sell herself and her soldiers, it'll be better if the buyer has a lot of money. Hopefully, when the Unified States makes its way to Ildoa, they'll be able to cut her a deal.

"…Hm?"

Tanya is suddenly overcome with a strange feeling. She brushes off the conspiracy that flashes in her mind with a smile.

"I probably shouldn't overthink things."

If *that* is the endgame to all of this, then Tanya is definitely reading too much into things. She must be tired from the past few weeks.

Tanya silently begins walking again through the recently occupied imperial territory. Her adjutant shoots her looks of doubt as she follows her, but thankfully, she knows when it isn't good to pry.

Right now, we—the Empire—are invading Ildoa.

One thing can be clearly seen from their new territory. Even the ruins in Ildoa are made from colorful stones. The people here are well-nourished compared to those in the Imperial camp, who can only be described as starved.

The difference in the power of our nations is stark.

If the Empire was as strong as Attila when he invaded Rome, our history may have been different. Sadly, we're no Huns.

"A powerless country, how sad…"

"Colonel?"

"I'm just grumbling to myself, First Lieutenant. Pay me no mind."

She waves off her adjutant and peers up at the Ildoan skies.

They are so clear, so blue, so beautiful.

It is so sunny here, a world full of sunshine.

It's so bright here that it makes the military uniforms we invaders are wearing as we push our way south stick out like a sore thumb.

This isn't a place the Empire should be.

The powerful system the Empire once held has been worn down by war, with our profits all but dried up. To top it all off, our value system is being worn away by the war as well.

We can never hope to regain our former glory from before this war. Whether we like it or not, the Reich and its Empire are on an irreversible path to their own destruction. Thinking about this, Tanya fiddles with an undersized potato and shows a wry grin while staring at some ruins.

Tanya may not be Caesar, but she knows exactly how he must have felt. She needs to cross the Rubicon, but if she crosses it, the

world will be different than it was yesterday.

Tanya won't deny the possibility of changing jobs. It is an important part of advancing her career. People shouldn't deny their right to choose via their own free will.

And yet, even then.

Now that things have come to this, we all have no choice but to run through to the very end.

It can't be said that any of us desired this.

But one thing is for sure. I know that General von Zettour is making a fruitless struggle with defeat as a pretense. The die has already been cast; all that's left is to wait for the results—something we won't know until the die stops rolling.

But this is General Zettour we are talking about here. It's safe to assume he has loaded the die in some way shape or form.

Is he going to fool the Empire or the world, or everyone for that matter?

Tanya has no way of knowing this.

My only choice is to try and imagine where our destination may lie. Whether it will contribute to me, or whether it will be the beginning of a new era.

All I know is that the wheels are already in motion.

There's nothing left to be said. The Empire is stretched as thin as this squalid potato.

There is only one path left for us to take: to cross the Rubicon and race through whatever lies ahead.

"The die has been cast…"

And there's no going back.

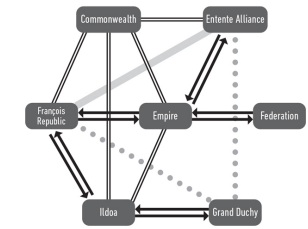
(The Saga of Tanya the Evil 11, Alea Iacta Est, The End)

Appendixes

Diplomatic Relations Charts

Diagram of Diplomatic Relations

❶ Before the War

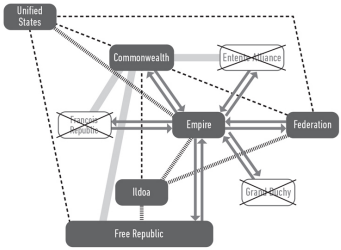


Neutral
Hypothetical Enemy
Good Relations
Allies

The countries surrounding the Empire form loose bonds with one another to both reclaim contested territories and contain the rising power.

It was the twilight of peacetime.

❷ Middle of the Great War



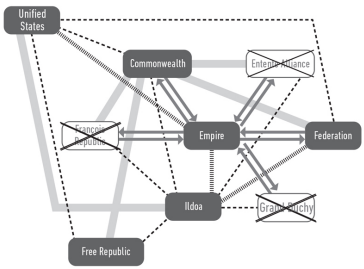
Engaged in Battle
Diplomatic Relations
Proactive Diplomatic Policy
Allies
Occupied

The height of Imperial power. The Empire is able to defeat any attempts to contain it. Claiming the François Republic, Entente Alliance, and Grand Duchy as its territories, the Empire maintains a military advantage in all directions.

During this time, the contending powers deepen their vague bonds from before the war.

Diplomatic Relations

❸ The Age of Ildoa



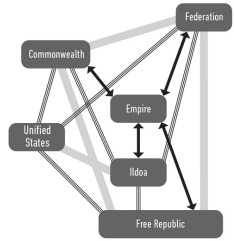
Engaged in Battle
Diplomatic Relations
Proactive Diplomatic Policy
Allies
Occupied

The strategic significance of Ildoa's neutrality increases exponentially.

The country skillfully positions itself as a potential mediator for peace on behalf of the Empire, and a dagger pointed at the heart of the Empire.

As a power that is neither pro- nor anti-Empire that remains dedicated to neutrality, the country enjoys prolonged peace.

❹ Now



At War
Allies
Deep Diplomatic Bond

The Empire has made the entire world its enemy.

Overview

The Empire, having invested almost nothing into diplomatic efforts, continues to try and force its demands onto its enemies through its ample military strength, all in the name of a theoretical peace at the end of its war effort. The future that would be waiting for it, however, is very different from what it had imagined for itself. After it becomes the world's enemy, the flames of total war keep spreading all around the Empire.

Afterword

Hey, it's Carlo. I know it's late for this, but Happy New Year! Is it okay if we end the greetings there this time? I want to save on my letter and sentence count.

This isn't a bad thing, but…there may be a brave soul out there who bought all eleven volumes at once.

I figured, statistically speaking, there is at least the possibility somebody does this. That is what I want to believe, anyway. That there is at least one person who does.

That is why I will send a message for any hero willing to accept it:

Hello, I am Carlo. I write novels and the story for the accompanying manga.

I like to eat ramen and drink coffee, and lately, I've been trying to fix my diet. It's easy to go on a diet. I've been on three of them already!

I jest; let's end my self-introduction there.

Though I ended up succeeding in keeping my publishers on the edge of their seats, I managed to release Volume 11. It's set to be released together with the new movie in February. I hope you all enjoy them both.

The movie is filled with plenty of awesomeness, such as a fight scene between Tanya and Mary, Loria's voice, and even the good-looking mature men who make up the General Staff.

(I should mention that as I write this afterword, it still isn't finished, but it *should* be by the time the eleventh volume hits stores, and I hope you can all enjoy it on schedule.)

I think it should be okay, schedule-wise. It probably will be. I hope, anyway!

Here's some info about this volume that I incidentally wrote while working on the movie.

This may end up being a spoiler, but Zettour is one hell of a

character to write. He was much easier to work with in the earlier volumes. After all, he was originally conservative enough to have reservations about using a young girl for war.

I don't know what happened, but he really began shining as a character as he adapted to the war. I struggled with this in the online version, but as I try to bring this war to a proper end, he keeps getting crazier and crazier.

It is rare for me to have so much fun writing a character.

I'll admit that, yes, I do enjoy the way he pushes Tanya. But maybe I just have a thing for silver foxes with a strong sense of duty? It is both fun and scary how the characters decide their own path while I do my writing… I just have to do what I can to make sure I can keep up with them.

I feel like the ending is on the horizon, and I hope that I can do what I can as a writer to keep it from being too predictable for my readers while working as much of my own tastes into it.

There are many people I need to thank for allowing me to make it this far. I want to thank my designer, Next Door Design; the service center for my publisher in Tokyo; my editors, Fujita and Tamai; and my illustrator, Shinotsuki.

I'll also break away from the people I usually thank this time to extend my thanks to Nut Inc. as well.

Their first-ever animation work was on *Tanya the Evil*, and they are the ones currently working on the new movie. I know how difficult we writers can be. I feel bad about how much trouble I've put them through. I really wish to thank each and every one of them for all the great work they've done on this project.

And, as always, let me extend my thanks to all my readers as well.

As I take a second to look at everything I've accomplished up until now, I know none of it would've been possible without you.

I hope you can look forward to what I produce next.

Until next time!

February 2019, ***Carlo Zen***

Volume 11
Shinobu
Shinotsuki

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